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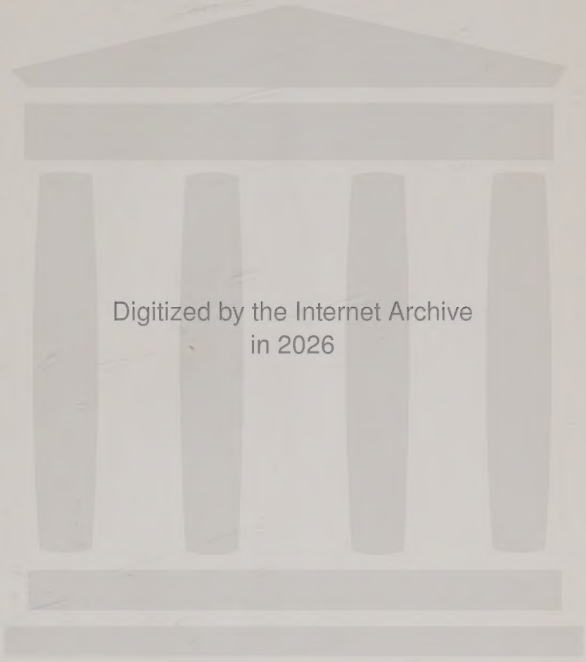
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A Study of Ben Jonson

A STUDY OF

BEN JONSON

BY

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

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I

COMEDIES, TRAGEDIES,

AND

MASQUES

I

COMEDIES, TRAGEDIES, AND MASQUES

If poets may be divided into two exhaustive but not exclusive classes,—the gods of harmony and creation, the giants of energy and invention,—the supremacy of Shakespeare among the gods of English verse is not more unquestionable than the supremacy of Jonson among its giants. Shakespeare himself stands no higher above Milton and Shelley than Jonson above Dryden and Byron. Beside the towering figure of this Enceladus the stature of Dryden seems but that of an ordinary man, the stature of Byron—who indeed can only be classed among giants by a somewhat licentious or audacious use of metaphor—seems little higher than a dwarf's. Not even the ardour of his most fanatical worshippers, from the date of Cartwright and Randolph to the date of Gilchrist and Gifford, could exaggerate the actual greatness of his various and marvellous energies. No giant ever came so

near to the ranks of the gods: were it possible for one not born a god to become divine by dint of ambition and devotion, this glory would have crowned the Titanic labours of Ben Jonson. There is something heroic and magnificent in his lifelong dedication of all his gifts and all his powers to the service of the art he had elected as the business of all his life and the aim of all his aspiration. And the result also was magnificent: the flowers of his growing have every quality but one which belongs to the rarest and finest among flowers: they have colour, form, variety, fertility, vigour: the one thing they want is fragrance. Once or twice only in all his indefatigable career of toil and triumph did he achieve what was easily and habitually accomplished by men otherwise unworthy to be named in the same day with him; by men who would have avowed themselves unworthy to unloose the latchets of his shoes. That singing power which answers in verse to the odour of a blossom, to the colouring of a picture, to the flavour of a fruit,—that quality without which they may be good, commendable, admirable, but cannot be delightful,—was not, it should seem, a natural gift of this great writer's: hardly now and then could his industry attain to it by some exceptional touch

of inspiration or of luck. It is 'above all strangeness' that a man labouring under this habitual disqualification should have been competent to recognize with accurate and delicate discernment an occasion on which he had for once risen above his usual capacity—a shot by which he had actually hit the white: but the lyrical verses which Ben Jonson quoted to Drummond as his best have exactly the quality which lyrical verse ought to have and which their author's lyrical verse almost invariably misses; the note of apparently spontaneous, inevitable, irrepressible and impeccable music. They might have been written by Coleridge or Shelley. But Ben, as a rule,—a rule which is proved by the exception—was one of the singers who could not sing; though, like Dryden, he could intone most admirably; which is more—and much more—than can truthfully be said for Byron. He, however, as well as Dryden, has one example of lyrical success to show for himself, as exceptional and as unmistakable as Jonson's. The incantation in *Œdipus*, brief as it is, and the first four stanzas of the incantation in *Manfred*, imitative as they are, reveal a momentary sense of music, a momentary command of the instrument employed, no less singular and no less absolute.

But Jonson, at all points the greatest and most genuine poet of the three, has achieved such a success more than once; has nearly achieved it, or has achieved a success only less absolute than this, more than a few times in the course of his works. And it should be remembered always that poetry in any other sense than the sense of invention or divination, creation by dint of recollection and by force of reproduction, was by no means the aim and end of his ambition. The grace, the charm, the magic of poetry was to him always a secondary if not always an inconsiderable quality in comparison with the weight of matter, the solidity of meaning, the significance and purpose of the thing suggested or presented. The famous men whose names may most naturally and most rationally be coupled with the more illustrious name of Ben Jonson came short of the triumph which might have been theirs in consequence of their worst faults or defects—of the weaker and baser elements in their moral nature; because they preferred self-interest in the one case and self-indulgence in the other to the noble toil and the noble pleasure of doing their best for their art's sake and their duty's, to the ultimate satisfaction of their conscience; a guide as sure and a

monitor as exacting in æsthetic matters—or, to use a Latin rather than a Greek word, in matters of pure intelligence—as in questions of ethics or morality. But with Ben Jonson conscience was the first and last consideration: the conscience of power which undoubtedly made him arrogant and exacting made him even more severe in self-exaction, more resolute in self-discipline, more inexorable in self-devotion to the elected labour of his life. From others he exacted much; but less than he exacted from himself. And it is to this noble uprightness of mind, to this lofty loyalty in labour, that the gravest vices and the most serious defects of his work may indisputably be traced. Reversing the famous axiom of Goldsmith's professional art-critic, we may say of Jonson's work in almost every instance that the picture would have been better if the artist had taken less pains. For in some cases at least he writes better as soon as he allows himself to write with ease—or at all events without elaborate ostentation of effort and demonstrative prodigality of toil. The unequalled breadth and depth of his reading could not but enrich as well as encumber his writings: those who could wish he had been less learned may be reminded how much we should

certainly lose—how much of solid and precious metal—for the mere chance of a possible gain in spontaneity and ease; in qualities of lyrical or dramatic excellence which it is doubtful whether he had received from nature in any degree comparable with those to which his learning gave a fresh impulse and a double force of energetic life. And when his work is at its worst, when his faults are most flagrant, when his tediousness is most unendurable, it is not his learning that is to blame, for his learning is not even apparent. The obtrusion and accumulation of details and references, allusions and citations, which encumber the text and the margin of his first Roman tragedy with such a ponderous mass of illustrative superfluity, may undoubtedly be set down, if not to the discredit, at least to the disadvantage of the poet whose resolute caprice had impelled him to be author and commentator, dramatist and scholiast, at once: but however tedious a languid or a cursory reader may find this part of Jonson's work, he must, if not abnormally perverse in stupidity, admit that it is far less wearisome, less vexatious, less deplorable and insufferable, than the interminable deserts of dreary dialogue in which the affectations, pretentions, or idiocies of the period are subjected

to the indefatigable and the lamentable industry of a caricaturist or a photographer.

There is nothing accidental in the work of Ben Jonson: no casual inspiration, no fortuitous impulse, ever guides or misguides his genius aright or astray. And this crowning and damning defect of a tedious and intolerable realism was even exceptionally wilful and premeditated. There is little if anything of it in the earliest comedy admitted into the magnificent edition which was compiled and published by himself in the year of the death of Shakespeare. And the humours of a still earlier comedy attributed to his hand, *The Case is Altered.* and printed apparently without his sanction just seven years before, are not worked out with such wearisome patience nor exhibited with such scientific persistency as afterwards distinguished the anatomical lecturer on vice and folly whose ideal of comic art was a combination of sarcasm and sermon in alternately epigrammatic and declamatory dialogue. I am by no means disposed to question the authenticity of this play, an excellent example of romantic comedy dashed with farce and flavoured with poetry: but, as far as I am aware, no notice has yet been taken of a noticeable coincidence between the manner or the circum-

stances of its publication and that of a spurious play which had nine years previously been attributed to Shakespeare. Some copies only of *The Case is Altered* bear on the title-page the name of Jonson, as some copies only of *Sir John Oldcastle* bear on the title-page the name of Shakespeare. In the earlier case, there can of course be no reasonable doubt that Shakespeare on his side, or the four actual authors of the gallimaufry on theirs, or perhaps all five together in the common though diverse interest of their respective credits, must have interfered to put a stop to the piratical profits of a lying and thieving publisher by compelling him to cancel the impudently mendacious title-page which imputed to Shakespeare the authorship of a play announced in its very prologue as the work of a writer or writers whose intention was to counteract the false impression given by Shakespeare's caricature, and to represent Prince Hal's old lad of the castle in his proper character of hero and martyr. In the later case, there can be little if any doubt that Jonson, then at the height of his fame and influence, must have taken measures to preclude the circulation under his name of a play which he would not or could not honestly acknowledge. So far, then, as external evidence goes, there is no

ground whatever for a decision as to whether *The Case is Altered* may be wholly or partially or not at all assignable to the hand of Jonson. My own conviction is that he certainly had a hand in it, and was not improbably its sole author: but that on the other hand it may not impossibly be one of the compound works on which he was engaged as a dramatic apprentice with other and less energetic playwrights in the dim back workshop of the slave-dealer and slave-driver whose diary records the grinding toil and the scanty wages of his lean and laborious bondsmen. Justice, at least since the days of Gifford, has generally been done to the bright and pleasant quality of this equally romantic and classical comedy; in which the passionate humour of the miser is handled with more freshness and freedom than we find in most of Jonson's later studies, while the figure of his putative daughter has more of grace and interest than he usually vouchsafed to be at the pains of bestowing on his official heroines. It is to be regretted, it is even to be deplored, that the influence of Plautus on the style and the method of Jonson was not more permanent and more profound. Had he been but content to follow his first impulse, to work after his earliest model—had he happily preferred

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those 'Plautinos et numeros et sales' for which his courtly friend Horace expressed so courtierly a contempt to the heavier numbers and the more laborious humours which he set himself to elaborate and to cultivate instead, we might not have had to applaud a more wonderful and admirable result, we should unquestionably have enjoyed a harvest more spontaneous and more gracious, more generous and more delightful. Something of the charm of Fletcher, his sweet straightforward fluency and instinctive lightness of touch, would have tempered the severity and solidity of his deliberate satire and his heavy-handed realism.

Every Man in his Humour.

And the noble work of comic art which followed on this first attempt gave even fuller evidence in its earlier than its later form of the author's capacity for poetic as well as realistic success. The defence of poetry which appears only in the first edition of *Every Man in his Humour* is worth all Sidney's and all Shelley's treatises thrown together. A stern and austere devotion to the principle which prohibits all indulgence in poetry, precludes all exuberance of expression, and immolates on the altar of accuracy all eloquence, all passion, and all inspiration incompatible with direct and prosaic reproduc-

tion of probable or plausible dialogue, induced its author to cancel this noble and majestic rhapsody; and in so doing gave fair and full forewarning of the danger which was to beset this too rigid and conscientious artist through the whole of his magnificent career. But in all other points the process of transformation to which its author saw fit to subject this comedy was unquestionably a process of improvement. Transplanted from the imaginary or fantastic Italy in which at first they lived and moved and had their being to the actual and immediate atmosphere of contemporary London, the characters gain even more in lifelike and interesting veracity or verisimilitude than in familiar attraction and homely association. Not only do we feel that we know them better, but we perceive that they are actually more real and cognisable creatures than they were under their former conditions of dramatic existence. But it must be with regret as well as with wonder that we find ourselves constrained to recognize the indisputable truth that this first acknowledged work of so great a writer is as certainly his best as it certainly is not his greatest. Never again did his genius, his industry, his conscience and his taste unite in the triumphant presentation of a work so faultless, so

satisfactory, so absolute in achievement and so free from blemish or defect. The only three others among all his plays which are not unworthy to be ranked beside it are in many ways more wonderful, more splendid, more incomparable with any other product of human intelligence or genius: but neither *The Fox*, *The Alchemist*, nor *The Staple of News*, is altogether so blameless and flawless a piece of work; so free from anything that might as well or better be dispensed with, so simply and thoroughly compact and complete in workmanship and in result. Molière himself has no character more exquisitely and spontaneously successful in presentation and evolution than the immortal and inimitable Bobadil: and even Bobadil is not unworthily surrounded and supported by the many other graver or lighter characters of this magnificent and perfect comedy.

It is difficult to attempt an estimate of the next endeavours or enterprises of Ben Jonson without incurring either the risk of impatient and uncritical injustice, if rein be given to the natural irritation and vexation of a disappointed and bewildered reader, or the no less imminent risk of one-sided and one-eyed partiality, if the superb literary quality, the elaborate intellectual excellence, of

these undramatic if not inartistic satires in dialogue be duly taken into account. From their author's point of view, they are worthy of all the applause he claimed for them; and to say this is to say much; but if the author's point of view was radically wrong, was fundamentally unsound, we can but be divided between condemnation and applause, admiration and regret. No student of our glorious language, no lover of our glorious literature, can leave these miscalled comedies unread without foregoing an experience which he should be reluctant to forego: but no reader who has any sense or any conception of comic art or of dramatic harmony will be surprised to find that the author's experience of their reception on the stage should have driven him by steady gradations of fury and consecutive degrees of arrogance into a state of mind and a style of work which must have seemed even to his well-wishers most unpromising for his future and final triumph. Little if anything can be added to the excellent critical remarks of Gifford on *Every Man out of his Humour*, *Cynthia's Revels*, and *Poetaster, or his Arraignment*. The first of these magnificent mistakes would be enough to ensure immortality to the genius of the poet capable of so superb and

elaborate an error. The fervour and intensity of the verse which expresses his loftier mood of intolerant indignation, the studious and implacable versatility of scorn which animates the expression of his disgust at the viler or crueller examples of social villainy then open to his contemptuous or furious observation, though they certainly cannot suffice to make a play, suffice to make a living and imperishable work of the dramatic satire which passes so rapidly from one phase to another of folly, fraud, or vice. And if it were not an inadmissible theory that the action or the structure of a play might be utterly disjointed and dislocated in order to ensure the complete presentation or development, the alternate exhibition or exposure, of each figure in the revolving gallery of a satirical series, we could hardly fear that our admiration of the component parts which fail to compose a coherent or harmonious work of art could possibly carry us too far into extravagance of applause. The noble rage which inspires the overture is not more absolute or perfect than the majestic structure of the verse: and the best comic or realistic scenes of the ensuing play are worthy to be compared—though it may not be altogether to their advantage—with the similar

Every Man out of his Humour.

work of the greatest succeeding artists in narrative or dramatic satire. Too much of the studious humour, too much of the versatile and laborious realism, displayed in the conduct and evolution of this satirical drama, may have been lavished and misused in the reproduction of ephemeral affectations and accidental forms of folly: but whenever the dramatic satirist, on purpose or by accident, strikes home to some deeper and more durable subject of satire, we feel the presence and the power of a poet and a thinker whose genius was not born to deal merely with ephemeral or casual matters. The small patrician fop and his smaller plebeian ape, though even now not undiverting figures, are inevitably less diverting to us, as they must have been even to the next generation from Jonson's, than to the audience for whom they were created: but the humour of the scene in which the highly intelligent and intellectual lady, who regards herself as the pattern at once of social culture and of personal refinement, is duped and disgraced by an equally simple and ingenious trick played off on her overweening and contemptuous vanity, might have been applauded by Shakespeare or by Vanbrugh, approved by Congreve or Molière. Here, among too many sketches of a kind which

can lay claim to no merit beyond that of an unlovely photograph, we find a really humorous conception embodied in a really amusing type of vanity and folly; and are all the more astonished to find a writer capable of such excellence and such error as every competent reader must recognize in the conception and execution of this rather admirable than delightful play. For Molière himself could hardly have improved on the scene in which a lady who is confident of her intuitive capacity to distinguish a gentleman from a pretender with no claim to that title is confronted with a vulgar clown, whose introducers have assured her that he is a high-bred gentleman masquerading for a wager under that repulsive likeness. She wonders that they can have imagined her so obtuse, so ignorant, so insensible to the difference between gentleman and clown: she finds that he plays his part as a boor very badly and transparently; and on discovering that he is in fact the boor she would not recognize, is driven to vanish in a passion of disgust. This is good comedy: but we can hardly say as much for the scene in which a speculator who has been trading on the starvation or destitution of his neighbours and tenants is driven to hang himself in despair at the

tidings of a better market for the poor, is cut down by the hands of peasants who have not recognized him, and on hearing their loudly expressed regrets for this act of inadvertent philanthropy becomes at once a beneficent and penitent philanthropist. Extravagant and exceptional as is this instance of Jonson's capacity for dramatic error—for the sacrifice at once of comic art and of common sense on the altar of moral or satirical purpose, it is but an extreme example of the result to which his theory must have carried his genius, gagged and handcuffed and drugged and blindfolded, had not his genius been too strong even for the force and the persistence of his theory. No reader and no spectator of his next comedy can have been inclined to believe or encouraged in believing that it was. The famous final verse of the epilogue to *Cynthia's Revels* can hardly sound otherwise to modern ears than as an expression of blustering diffidence—of blatant self-distrust. That any audience should have sat out the five undramatic acts of this 'dramatic satire' is as inconceivable as that any reader, however exasperated and exhausted by its voluminous perversities, should fail to do justice to its literary merits; to the vigour and purity of its English, to the mas-

Cynthia's Revels.

culine refinement and the classic straightforwardness of its general style. There is an exquisite song in it, and there are passages—nay, there are scenes—of excellent prose: but the intolerable elaboration of pretentious dullness and ostentatious ineptitude for which the author claims not merely the tolerance or the condonation which gratitude or charity might accord to the misuse or abuse of genius, but the acclamation due to its exercise and the applause demanded by its triumph—the heavy-headed perversity which ignores all the duties and reclaims all the privileges of a dramatic poet—the Cyclopean ponderosity of perseverance which hammers through scene after scene at the task of ridicule by anatomy of tedious and preposterous futilities—all these too conscientious outrages offered to the very principle of comedy, of poetry, or of drama, make us wonder that we have no record of a retort from the exhausted audience—if haply there were any auditors left—to the dogged defiance of the epilogue:—

> By God 'tis good, and if you like 't you may.
> —By God 'tis bad, and worse than tongue can say.

For the most noticeable point in this studiously wayward and laboriously erratic design is that the principle of composition is as conspicuous by its

absence as the breath of inspiration: that the artist, the scholar, the disciple, the student of classic models, is as indiscoverable as the spontaneous humourist or poet. The wildest, the roughest, the crudest offspring of literary impulse working blindly on the passionate elements of excitable ignorance was never more formless, more incoherent, more defective in structure, than this voluminous abortion of deliberate intelligence and conscientious culture.

There is a curious monotony in the variety — if there be not rather a curious variety in the monotony — of character and of style which makes it even more difficult to resume the study of *Cynthia's Revels* when once broken off than even to read through its burdensome and bulky five acts at a sitting; but the reader who lays siege to it with a sufficient supply of patience will find that the latter is the surer if not the only way to appreciate the genuine literary value of its better portions. Most of the figures presented are less than sketches and little more than outlines of inexpert and intolerant caricature: but the 'half-saved' or (as Carlyle has it) 'insalvable' coxcomb and parasite Asotus, who puts himself under the tuition of Amorphus and the patronage of Anaides,

is a creature with something of real comic life in him. By what process of induction or deduction the wisdom of critical interpreters should have discerned in the figure of his patron, a fashionable ruffler and ruffian, the likeness of Thomas Dekker, a humble, hard-working, and highly-gifted hack of letters, may be explicable by those who can explain how the character of Hedon, a courtly and voluptuous coxcomb, can have been designed to cast ridicule on John Marston, a rude and rough-hewn man of genius, the fellow-craftsman of Ben Jonson as satirist and as playwright. But such absurdities of misapplication and misconstruction, once set afloat on the Lethean waters of stagnating tradition, will float for ever by grace of the very rottenness which prevents them from sinking. Ignorance assumes and idleness repeats what sciolism ends by accepting as a truth no less indisputable than undisputed. To any rational and careful student it must be obvious that until the publication of Jonson's *Poetaster* we cannot trace, I do not say with any certainty of evidence, but with any plausibility of conjecture, the identity of the principal persons attacked or derided by the satirist. And to identify the originals of such figures as Clove and Orange in *Every Man out of*

his Humour can hardly, as Carlyle might have expressed it, be matter of serious interest to any son of Adam. But the famous polemical comedy which appeared a year later than the appearance of *Cynthia's Revels* bore evidence about it, unmistakable by reader or spectator, alike to the general design of the poet and to the particular direction of his personalities. Jonson of course asserted and of course believed that he had undergone gross and incessant provocation for years past from the 'petulant' onslaughts of Marston and Dekker: but what were his grounds for this assertion and this belief we have no means whatever of deciding—we have no ground whatever for conjecture. What we cannot but perceive is the possibly more important fact that indignation and ingenuity, pugnacity and self-esteem, combined to produce and succeeded in producing an incomparably better comedy than the author's last and a considerably better composition than the author's penultimate attempt. Even the 'apologetical dialogue' appended for the benefit of the reader, fierce and arrogant as it seems to us in its bellicose ambition and its quarrelsome self-assertion, is less violent and overweening in its tone than the furious eloquence of the prelude to

Poetaster.

Every Man out of his Humour. The purity of passion, the sincerity of emotion, which inspires and inflames that singular and splendid substitute for an ordinary prologue, never found again an expression so fervent and so full in the many and various appeals of its author to his audience, immediate or imaginary, against the malevolence of enemies or of critics. But in this Augustan satire his rage and scorn are tempered and adapted to something of dramatic purpose; their expression is more coherent, if not less truculent,—their effect is more harmonious, if not more genuine,—than in the two preceding plays.

There is much in the work of Ben Jonson which may seem strange and perplexing to the most devout and rapturous admirer of his genius: there is nothing so singular, so quaint, so inexplicable, as his selection of Horace for a sponsor or a patron saint. The affinity between Virgil and Tennyson, between Shelley and Lucretius, is patent and palpable: but when Jonson assumes the mask of Horace we can only wonder what would have been the sensation on Olympus if Pluto had suddenly proposed to play the part of Cupid, or if Vulcan had obligingly offered to run on the errands of Mercury. This eccentricity of egoism

is only less remarkable than the mixture of care and recklessness in the composition of a play which presents us at its opening with an apparent hero in the person, not of Horace, but of Ovid; and after following his fortunes through four-fifths of the action, drops him into exile at the close of the fourth act, and proceeds with the business of the fifth as though no such figure had ever taken part in the conduct of the play. Shakespeare, who in Jonson's opinion 'wanted art,' assuredly never showed himself so insensible to the natural rules of art as his censor has shown himself here. Apart from the incoherence of construction which was perhaps inevitable in such a complication of serious with satirical design, there is more of artistic merit in this composite work of art than in any play produced by its author since the memorable date of *Every Man in his Humour*. The character of Captain Pantilius Tucca, which seems to have brought down on its creator such a boiling shower-bath or torrent of professional indignation from quarters in which his own distinguished service as a soldier and a representative champion of English military hardihood would seem to have been unaccountably if not scandalously forgotten, is beyond comparison the

brightest and the best of his inventions since the date of the creation of Bobadil. But the decrease in humanity of humour, in cordial and genial sympathy or tolerance of imagination, which marks the advance of his genius towards its culmination of scenical and satirical success in *The Alchemist* must be obvious at this stage of his work to those who will compare the delightful cowardice and the inoffensive pretention of Bobadil with the blatant vulgarity and the flagrant rascality of Tucca.

Sejanus.

In the memorable year which brought into England her first king of Scottish birth, and made inevitable the future conflict between the revolutionary principle of monarchy by divine right and the conservative principle of self-government by deputy for the commonweal of England, the first great writer who thought fit to throw in his lot with the advocates of the royalist revolution produced on the boards a tragedy of which the moral, despite his conscious or unconscious efforts to disguise or to distort it, is as thoroughly republican and as tragically satirical of despotism as is that of Shakespeare's *Julius Cæsar*. It would be well for the fame of Jonson if the parallel could be carried further: but,

although *Sejanus his Fall* may not have received on its appearance the credit or the homage due to the serious and solid merit of its composition and its execution, it must be granted that the author has once more fallen into the excusable but nevertheless unpardonable error of the too studious and industrious Martha. He was careful and troubled about many things absolutely superfluous and supererogatory; matters of no value or concern whatever for the purpose or the import of a dramatic poem: but the one thing needful, the very condition of poetic life and dramatic interest, he utterly and persistently overlooked. Tiberius, the central character of the action—for the eponymous hero or protagonist of the play is but a crude study of covetous and lecherous ambition,—has not life enough in the presentation of him to inform the part with interest. No praise—of the sort which is due to such labours—can be too high for the strenuous and fervid conscience which inspires every line of the laborious delineation: the recorded words of the tyrant are wrought into the text, his traditional characteristics are welded into the action, with a patient and earnest fidelity which demands applause no less than recognition: but when we turn from this elaborate statue—

from this exquisitely articulated skeleton—to the living figure of Octavius or of Antony, we feel and understand more than ever that Shakespeare 'hath chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from him.'

Coleridge has very justly animadverted on 'the anachronic mixture' of Anglican or Caledonian royalism with the conservatism of an old Roman republican in the character of Arruntius: but we may trace something of the same incongruous combination in the character of a poet who was at once the sturdiest in aggressive eagerness of self-assertion, and the most copious in courtly effusion of panegyric, among all the distinguished writers of his day. The power of his verse and the purity of his English are nowhere more remarkable than in his two Roman tragedies: on the other hand, his great fault or defect as a dramatist is nowhere more perceptible. This general if not universal infirmity is one which never seems to have occurred to him, careful and studious though he was always of his own powers and performances, as anything of a fault at all. It is one indeed which no writer afflicted with it could reasonably be expected to recognize or to repair. Of all purely negative faults, all sins

of intellectual omission, it is perhaps the most serious and the most irremediable. It is want of sympathy ; a lack of cordial interest, not in his own work or in his own genius,—no one will assert that Jonson was deficient on that score,—but in the individual persons, the men and women represented on the stage. He took so much interest in the creations that he had none left for the creatures of his intellect or art. This fault is not more obvious in the works of his disciples Cartwright and Randolph than in the works of their master. The whole interest is concentrated on the intellectual composition and the intellectual development of the characters and the scheme. Love and hatred, sympathy and antipathy, are superseded and supplanted by pure scientific curiosity : the clear glow of serious or humorous emotion is replaced by the dry light of analytical investigation. *Si vis me flere* – the proverb is something musty. Neither can we laugh heartily or long where all chance of sympathy or cordiality is absolutely inconceivable. The loving laughter which salutes the names of Dogberry and Touchstone, Mrs. Quickly and Falstaff, is never evoked by the most gorgeous opulence of humour, the most glorious audacity of intrigue, which dazzles and delights our under-

standing in the parts of Sir Epicure Mammon, Rabbi Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, Morose and Fitzdottrel and Mosca: even Bobadil, the most comically attractive of all cowards and braggarts on record, has no such hold on our regard as many a knave and many a fool of Shakespeare's comic progeny. The triumph of 'Don Face' over his confederates, though we may not be so virtuous as to grudge it him, puts something of a strain upon our conscience if it is heartily to be applauded and enjoyed. One figure, indeed, among all the multitude of Jonson's invention, is so magnificent in the spiritual stature of his wickedness, in the still dilating verge and expanding proportion of his energies, that admiration in this single case may possibly if not properly overflow into something of intellectual if not moral sympathy. The genius and the courage of Volpone, his sublimity of cynic scorn and his intensity of contemptuous enjoyment,—his limitless capacity for pleasure and his dauntless contemplation of his crimes,—make of this superb sinner a figure which we can hardly realize without some sense of imperious fascination. His views of humanity are those of Swift and of Carlyle: but in him their fruit is not bitterness of sorrow and anger, but rapture of satisfaction

and of scorn. His English kinsman, Sir Epicure Mammon, for all his wealth of sensual imagination and voluptuous eloquence, for all his living play of humour and glowing force of faith, is essentially but a poor creature when set beside the great Venetian. Had the study of Tiberius been informed and vivified by something of the same fervour, the tragedy of *Sejanus* might have had in it some heat of more than merely literary life. But this lesser excellence, the merit of vigorous and vigilant devotion or application to a high and serious object of literary labour, is apparent in every scene of the tragedy. That the subject is one absolutely devoid of all but historical and literary interest—that not one of these scenes can excite for one instant the least touch, the least phantom, the least shadow of pity or terror—would apparently have seemed to its author no argument against its claim to greatness as a tragic poem. But if it could be admitted, as it will never be by any unperverted judgment, that this eternal canon of tragic art, the law which defines terror and pity as its only proper objects, the alpha and omega of its aim and its design, may ever be disregarded or ignored, we should likewise have to admit that Jonson had in this instance achieved

a success as notable as we must otherwise consider his failure. For the accusation of weakness in moral design, of feeble or unnatural treatment of character, cannot with any show of justice be brought against him. Coleridge, whose judgment on a question of ethics will scarcely be allowed to carry as much weight as his authority on matters of imagination, objects with some vehemence to the incredible inconsistency of Sejanus in appealing for a sign to the divinity whose altar he proceeds to overthrow, whose power he proceeds to defy, on the appearance of an unfavourable presage. This doubtless is not the conduct of a strong man or a rational thinker: but the great minister of Tiberius is never for an instant throughout the whole course of the action represented as a man of any genuine strength or any solid intelligence. He is shown to us as merely a cunning, daring, unscrupulous and imperious upstart, whose greed and craft, impudence and audacity, intoxicate while they incite and undermine while they uplift him.

The year which witnessed the appearance of *Sejanus* on the stage—acclaimed by Chapman at greater length if not with greater fervour than by any other of Jonson's friends or satellites—

witnessed also the first appearance of its author in a character which undoubtedly gave free play to some of his most remarkable abilities, but which unquestionably diverted and distorted and absorbed his genius as a dramatist and his talent as a poet after a fashion which no capable student can contemplate without admiration or consider without regret. The few readers whose patient energy and conscientious curiosity may have led them to traverse—a pilgrimage more painful than Dante's or than Bunyan's—the entire record of the 'Entertainment' which escorted and delayed, at so many successive stations, the progress through London and Westminster of the long-suffering son of Mary Queen of Scots, will probably agree that of the two poetic dialogues or eclogues contributed by Jonson to the metrical part of the ceremony, the dialogue of the Genius and the Flamen is better than that of the Genius and Thamesis; more smooth, more vigorous, and more original. The subsequent prophecy of Electra is at all points unlike the prophecies of a Cassandra: there is something doubly tragic in the irony of chance which put into the mouth of Agamemnon's daughter a prophecy of good fortune to the royal house of Stuart on its first entrance

Part of King James's Entertainment.

into the capital and ascension to the throne of England. The subsequent *Panegyre* is justly praised by Gifford for its manly and dignified style of official compliment—courtliness untainted by servility: but the style is rather that of fine prose, sedately and sedulously measured and modulated, than that of even ceremonial poetry.

A Panegyre.

In the same energetic year of his literary life the Laureate produced one of his best minor works—*The Satyr*, a little lyric drama so bright and light and sweet in fancy and in finish of execution that we cannot grudge the expenditure of time and genius on so slight a subject. *The Penates*, which appeared in the following year, gave evidence again of the strong and lively fancy which was to be but too often exercised in the same field of ingenious and pliant invention. The metre is well conceived and gracefully arranged, worthy indeed of nobler words than those which it clothes with light and pleasant melody. The octosyllabics, it will be observed by metrical students, are certainly good, but decidedly not faultless: the burlesque part sustained by Pan is equally dexterous and brilliant in execution.

The Satyr.

The Penates.

In 1605 the singular and magnificent coalition of powers which served to build up the composite genius of Jonson displayed in a single masterpiece the consummate and crowning result of its marvellous energies. No other of even his very greatest works is at once so admirable and so enjoyable. The construction or composition of *The Alchemist* is perhaps more wonderful in the perfection and combination of cumulative detail, in triumphant simplicity of process and impeccable felicity of result: but there is in *Volpone* a touch of something like imagination, a savour of something like romance, which gives a higher tone to the style and a deeper interest to the action. The chief agents are indeed what Mr. Carlyle would have called 'unspeakably unexemplary mortals': but the serious fervour and passionate intensity of their resolute and resourceful wickedness give somewhat of a lurid and distorted dignity to the display of their doings and sufferings, which is wanting to the less gigantic and heroic villainies of Subtle, Dol, and Face. The absolutely unqualified and unrelieved rascality of every agent in the later comedy—unless an exception should be made in favour of the unfortunate though enterprising Surly—is another note of inferiority; a mark of

Volpone, or The Fox.

comparative baseness in the dramatic metal. In *Volpone* the tone of villainy and the tone of virtue are alike higher. Celia is a harmless lady, if a too submissive consort; Bonario is an honourable gentleman, if too dutiful a son. The Puritan and shopkeeping scoundrels who are swindled by Face and plundered by Lovewit are viler if less villainous figures than the rapacious victims of Volpone.

As to the respective rank or comparative excellence of these two triumphant and transcendent masterpieces, the critic who should take upon himself to pass sentence or pronounce judgment would in my opinion display more audacity than discretion. The steadfast and imperturbable skill of hand which has woven so many threads of incident, so many shades of character, so many changes of intrigue, into so perfect and superb a pattern of incomparable art as dazzles and delights the reader of *The Alchemist* is unquestionably unique—above comparison with any later or earlier example of kindred genius in the whole range of comedy, if not in the whole world of fiction. The manifold harmony of inventive combination and imaginative contrast—the multitudinous unity of various and concordant effects—the complexity and the simplicity of action and impression, which hardly

allow the reader's mind to hesitate between enjoyment and astonishment, laughter and wonder, admiration and diversion—all the distinctive qualities which the alchemic cunning of the poet has fused together in the crucible of dramatic satire for the production of a flawless work of art, have given us the most perfect model of imaginative realism and satirical comedy that the world has ever seen; the most wonderful work of its kind that can ever be run upon the same lines. Nor is it possible to resist a certain sense of immoral sympathy and humorous congratulation, more keen than any Scapin or Mascarille can awake in the mind of a virtuous reader, when Face dismisses Surly with a promise to bring him word to his lodging if he can hear of 'that Face' whom Surly has sworn to mark for his if ever he meets him. From the date of Plautus to the date of Sheridan it would surely be difficult to find in any comedy a touch of glorious impudence which might reasonably be set against this. And the whole part is so full of brilliant and effective and harmonious touches or strokes of character or of humour that even this crowning instance of serene inspiration in the line of superhuman audacity seems merely right and simply natural.

And yet, even while possessed and overmastered by the sense of the incomparable energy, the impeccable skill, and the indefatigable craftsmanship, which combined and conspired together to produce this æsthetically blameless masterpiece, the reader whose instinct requires something more than merely intellectual or æsthetic satisfaction must recognize even here the quality which distinguishes the genius of Ben Jonson from that of the very greatest imaginative humourists—Aristophanes or Rabelais, Shakespeare or Sterne, Vanbrugh or Dickens, Congreve or Thackeray. Each of these was evidently capable of falling in love with his own fancy—of rejoicing in his own imaginative humour as a swimmer in the waves he plays with: but this buoyant and passionate rapture was controlled by an instinctive sense which forbade them to strike out too far or follow the tide too long. However quaint or queer, however typical or exceptional, the figure presented may be—Olivia's or Tristram Shandy's uncle Toby, Sir John Brute or Mr. Peggotty, Lady Wishfort or Lady Kew,—we recognize and accept them as lifelike and actual intimates whose acquaintance has been made for life. Sir Sampson Legend might undoubtedly find himself as much out of place in the drawing-

room of the Countess Dowager of Kew as did Sir Wilful Witwoud, on a memorable occasion, in the saloon of his aunt Lady Wishfort: Captain Toby Shandy could hardly have been expected to tolerate the Rabelaisian effervescences of Sir Toby Belch: and Vanbrugh's typical ruffians of rank have little apparently in common with Dickens's representative heroes of the poor. But in all these immortal figures there is the lifeblood of eternal life which can only be infused by the sympathetic faith of the creator in his creature—the breath which animates every word, even if the word be not the very best word that might have been found, with the vital impulse of infallible imagination. But it is difficult to believe that Ben Jonson can have believed, even with some half sympathetic and half sardonic belief, in all the leading figures of his invention. Scorn and indignation are but too often the motives or the mainsprings of his comic art; and when dramatic poetry can exist on the sterile and fiery diet of scorn and indignation, we may hope to find life sustained in happiness and health on a diet of aperients and emetics. The one great modern master of analytic art is somewhat humaner than Jonson in the application of his scientific method to the purpose of dramatic satire. The

study of Sludge is finer and subtler by far than the study of Subtle; though undoubtedly it is, in consequence of that very perfection and sublimation of exhaustive analysis, less available for any but a monodramatic purpose. No excuse, no plea, no pretext beyond the fact of esurience and the sense of ability, is suggested for the villainy of Subtle, Dol, and Face. But if we were to see what might possibly be said in extenuation of their rogueries, to hear what might possibly be pleaded in explanation or condonation of their lives, the comedy would fall through and go to pieces: the dramatic effect would collapse and be dissolved. And to this great, single, æsthetic end of art the consummate and conscientious artist who created these immortal figures was content to subdue or to sacrifice all other and subordinate considerations. Coleridge, as no reader will probably need to be reminded, 'thought the *Œdipus Tyrannus*, *The Alchemist*, and *Tom Jones*, the three most perfect plots ever planned.' With the warmest admiration and appreciation of Fielding's noble and immortal masterpiece, I cannot think it at all worthy of comparison, for blameless ingenuity of composition and absolute impeccability of design, with the greatest of tragic and the greatest of comic triumphs in

construction ever accomplished by the most consummate and the most conscientious among ancient and modern artists. And when we remember that this perfection of triumphant art is exhibited, not on the scale of an ordinary comedy, whether classic or romantic, comprising a few definite types and a few impressive situations, but on a scale of invention so vast and so various as to comprise in the course of a single play as many characters and as many incidents, all perfectly adjusted and naturally developed out of each other, as would amply suffice for the entire dramatic furniture, for the entire poetic equipment, of a great dramatic poet, we feel that Gifford's expression, a 'prodigy of human intellect,' is equally applicable to *The Fox* and to *The Alchemist*, and is not a whit too strong a term for either. Nor can I admit, as I cannot discern, the blemish or imperfection which others have alleged that they descry in the composition of *Volpone*—the unlikelihood of the device by which retribution is brought down in the fifth act on the criminals who were left at the close of the fourth act in impregnable security and triumph. So far from regarding the comic Nemesis or rather Ate which infatuates and impels Volpone to his doom as a sacrifice of art to morality, an immolation of probability and consistency on the

altar of poetic justice, I admire as a master-stroke of character the haughty audacity of caprice which produces or evolves his ruin out of his own hardihood and insolence of exulting and daring enjoyment. For there is something throughout of the lion as well as of the fox in this original and incomparable figure. I know not where to find a third instance of catastrophe comparable with that of either *The Fox* or *The Alchemist* in the whole range of the highest comedy; whether for completeness, for propriety, for interest, for ingenious felicity of event or for perfect combination and exposition of all the leading characters at once in supreme simplicity, unity, and fullness of culminating effect.

And only in the author's two great farces shall we find so vast a range and variety of characters. The foolish and famous couplet of doggrel rhyme which brackets *The Silent Woman* with *The Fox* and *The Alchemist* is liable to prejudice the reader against a work which if compared with those marvellous masterpieces must needs seem to lose its natural rights to notice, to forfeit its actual claim on our rational admiration. Its proper place is not with these, but beside its fellow example of exuberant, elaborate, and deliberately farcical

realism—*Bartholomew Fair*. And the two are not less wonderful in their own way, less triumphant on their own lines, than those two crowning examples of comedy. Farcical in construction and in action, they belong to the province of the higher form of art by virtue of their leading characters. Morose indeed, as a victimized monomaniac, is rather a figure of farce than of comedy: Captain Otter and his termagant are characters of comedy rather broad than high: but the collegiate ladies, in their matchless mixture of pretention and profligacy, hypocrisy and pedantry, recall rather the comedies than the farces of Molière by the elaborate and vivid precision of portraiture which presents them in such perfect finish, with such vigour and veracity of effect. Again, if *Bartholomew Fair* is mere farce in many of its minor characters and in some of its grosser episodes and details, the immortal figure of Rabbi Busy belongs to the highest order of comedy. In that absolute and complete incarnation of Puritanism full justice is done to the merits while full justice is done upon the demerits of the barbarian sect from whose inherited and infectious tyranny this nation is as yet but imperfectly delivered. Brother Zeal-of-the-Land is no vulgar impostor, no mere religious quacksalver

of such a kind as supplies the common food for satire, the common fuel of ridicule : he is a hypocrite of the earnest kind, an Ironside among civilians ; and the very abstinence of his creator from Hudibrastic misrepresentation and caricature makes the satire more thoroughly effective than all that Butler's exuberance of wit and prodigality of intellect could accomplish. The snuffling glutton who begins by exciting our laughter ends by displaying a comic perversity of stoicism in the stocks which is at least more respectable if not less laughable than the complacency of Justice Overdo, the fatuity of poor Cokes, the humble jocosity of a Littlewit, or the intemperate devotion of a Waspe. Hypocrisy streaked with sincerity, greed with a cross of earnestness and craft with a dash of fortitude, combine to make of the Rabbi at once the funniest, the fairest, and the faithfullest study ever taken of a less despicable than detestable type of fanatic.

Not only was the genius of Jonson too great, but his character was too radically noble for a realist or naturalist of the meaner sort. It is only in the minor parts of his gigantic work, only in its insignificant or superfluous components or details, that we find a tedious insistence on wearisome or offensive topics of inartistic satire or ineffectual

display. Nor is it upon the ignoble sides of character that this great satiric dramatist prefers to concentrate his attention. As even in the most terrible masterpieces of Balzac, it is not the wickedness of the vicious or criminal agents, it is their energy of intellect, their dauntless versatility of daring, their invincible fertility of resource, for which our interest is claimed or by which our admiration is aroused. In Face as in Subtle, in Volpone as in Mosca, the qualities which delight us are virtues misapplied: it is not their cunning, their avarice, or their lust, it is their courage, their genius, and their wit in which we take no ignoble or irrational pleasure. And indeed it would be strange and incongruous if a great satirist who was also a great poet had erred so grossly as not to aim at this result, or had fallen so grievously short of his aim as not to vindicate the dignity of his design. The same year in which the stage first echoed the majestic accents of Volpone's opening speech was distinguished by the appearance of the *Masque of Blackness*: a work eminent even among its author's in splendour of fancy, invention, and flowing eloquence. Its companion or counterpart, the *Masque of Beauty*, a poem even more notable

The Masque of Blackness.

The Masque of Beauty.

for these qualities than its precursor, did not appear till three years later. Its brilliant and picturesque variations on the previous theme afford a perfect example of poetic as distinct from prosaic ingenuity.

Between the dates of these two masques, which were first printed and published together, three other entertainments had employed the energetic genius of the Laureate on the double task of scenical invention and literary decoration. The first occasion was that famous visit of King Christian and his hard-drinking Danes which is patriotically supposed to have done so much harm to the proverbially sober and abstemious nation whose temperance is so vividly depicted by the enthusiastic cordiality of Iago. The *Entertainment of Two Kings at Theobalds* opens well, with two vigorous and sonorous couplets of welcome: but the Latin verses are hardly worthy of Gifford's too fervid commendation. The mock marriage of the boyish Earl of Essex and the girl afterwards known to ill fame as Countess of Somerset gave occasion of which Jonson availed himself to the full for massive display of antiquarian magnificence and indefatigable prodigality of inexhaustible

Entertainment of Two Kings at Theobalds.

Hymenaei.

detail. The epithalamium of these quasi-nuptials is fine—when it is not coarse (we cannot away, for instance, with the comparison, in serious poetry, of kisses to—cockles !) : but the exuberant enthusiasm of Gifford for 'this chaste and beautiful gem' is liable to provoke in the reader's mind a comparison 'with the divine original' : and among the very few poets who could sustain a comparison with Catullus no man capable of learning the merest rudiments of poetry will affirm that Ben Jonson can be ranked. His verses are smooth and strong, 'well-torned and true-filed' : but the matchless magic, the impeccable inspiration, the grace, the music, the simple and spontaneous perfection of the Latin poem, he could pretend neither to rival nor to reproduce. 'What was my part,' says Jonson in a note, 'the faults here, as well as the virtues, must speak.' These are the concluding words of a most generous and cordial tribute to the merits of the mechanist or stage-carpenter, the musician, and the dancing-master—Inigo Jones, Alfonso Ferrabosco, and Thomas Giles—who were employed on the composition of this magnificent if ill-omened pageant : and they may very reasonably be applied to the two translations from Catullus which the poet—certainly no prophet on this

particular occasion—thought fit to introduce into the ceremonial verse of the masques held on the first and second nights of these star-crossed festivities. The faults and the virtues, the vigour of phrase and the accuracy of rendering, the stiffness of expression and the slowness of movement, are unmistakably characteristic of the workman. But in the second night's masque it must be noted that the original verse is distinctly better than the translated stanzas: the dispute of Truth and Opinion is a singularly spirited and vigorous example of amœbæan allegory. In the next year's *Entertainment* of the king and queen at Theobalds, then ceded by its owner to the king, the happy simplicity of invention and arrangement is worthily seconded or supported by the grave and dignified music of the elegiac verse which welcomes the coming and speeds the parting master. Next year *The Masque of Beauty* and the masque at Lord Haddington's marriage, each containing some of Jonson's finest and most flowing verse, bore equal witness to the energy and to the elasticity of his genius for apt and varied invention. The amœbæan stanzas in the later of these two masques have more freedom of movement and spontaneity of

Entertainment of King James and Queen Anne at Theobalds.

music than will perhaps be found in any other poem of equal length from the same indefatigable hand. The fourth of these stanzas is simply magnificent: the loveliness of the next is impaired by that anatomical particularity which too often defaces the serious verse of Jonson with grotesque if not gross deformity of detail. No other poet, except possibly one of his spiritual sons, too surely 'sealed of the tribe of Ben,' would have introduced 'liver' and 'lights' into a sweet and graceful effusion of lyric fancy, good alike in form and sound; a commendation not always nor indeed very frequently deserved by the verse of its author. The variations in the burden of 'Hymen's war' are singularly delicate and happy.

Masque at Lord Haddington's Marriage.

The next was a memorable year in the literary life of Ben Jonson: it witnessed the appearance both of the magnificent *Masque of Queens* and of the famous comedy or farce of *The Silent Woman*. The marvellously vivid and dexterous application of marvellous learning and labour which distinguishes the most splendid of all masques as one of the typically splendid monuments or trophies of English literature has apparently eclipsed, in the

The Masque of Queens.

appreciation of the general student, that equally admirable fervour of commanding fancy which informs the whole design and gives life to every detail. The interlude of the witches is so royally lavish in its wealth and variety of fertile and lively horror that on a first reading the student may probably do less than justice to the lofty and temperate eloquence of the noble verse and the noble prose which follow.

The Silent Woman.

Of *The Silent Woman* it is not easy to say anything new and true. Its merits are salient and superb: the combination of parts and the accumulation of incidents are so skilfully arranged and so powerfully designed that the result is in its own way incomparable —or comparable only with other works of the master's hand while yet in the fullness of its cunning and the freshness of its strength. But a play of this kind must inevitably challenge a comparison, in the judgment of modern readers, between its author and Molière: and Jonson can hardly, on the whole, sustain that most perilous comparison. It is true that there is matter enough in Jonson's play to have furnished forth two or three of Molière's: and that on that ground—on the score of industrious intelligence and laborious versa-

tility of humour—*The Silent Woman* is as superior to the *Misanthrope* and the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* as to *Twelfth Night* and *Much Ado about Nothing*. But even when most dazzled by the splendour of studied wit and the felicity of deliberate humour which may even yet explain the extraordinary popularity or reputation of this most imperial and elaborate of all farces, we feel that the author could no more have rivalled the author of *Twelfth Night* than he could have rivalled the author of *Othello*. The Nemesis of the satirist is upon him: he cannot be simply at ease: he cannot be happy in his work without some undertone of sarcasm, some afterthought of allusion, aimed at matters which Molière would have reserved for a slighter style of satire, and which Shakespeare would scarcely have condescended to recognise as possible objects of even momentary attention. His wit is wonderful—admirable, laughable, laudable—it is not in the fullest and the deepest sense delightful. It is radically cruel, contemptuous, intolerant: the sneer of the superior person—Dauphine or Clerimont—is always ready to pass into a snarl: there is something in this great classic writer of the bull-baiting or bear-baiting brutality of his age. We put down *The Fox* or *The Alchemist*

with a sense of wondering admiration, hardly affected by the impression of some occasional superfluity or excess: we lay aside *The Silent Woman*, not indeed without grateful recollection of much cordial enjoyment, but with distinct if reluctant conviction that the generous table at which we have been so prodigally entertained was more than a little crowded and overloaded with multifarious if savoury encumbrance of dishes. And if, as was Gifford's opinion, Shakespeare took a hint from the mock duellists in this comedy for the mock duellists in *Twelfth Night*, how wonderfully has he improved on his model! The broad rude humour of Jonson's practical joke is boyishly brutal in the horseplay of its violence: the sweet bright fun of Shakespeare's is in perfect keeping with the purer air of the sunnier climate it thrives in. The divine good-nature, the godlike good-humour of Shakespeare can never be quite perfectly appreciated till we compare his playfulness or his merriment with other men's. Even that of Aristophanes seems to smack of the barbarian beside it.

I cannot but fear that to thorough-going Jonsonians my remarks on the great comedy in which Dryden found the highest perfection of dramatic art on record may seem inadequate if

not inappreciative. But to do it anything like justice would take up more space than I can spare: it would indeed, like most of Jonson's other successful plays, demand a separate study of some length and elaboration. The high comedy of the collegiate ladies, the low comedy of Captain and Mrs. Otter, the braggart knights and the Latinist barber, are all as masterly as the versions of Ovid's elegiacs into prose dialogue are tedious in their ingenuity and profitless in their skill. As to the chief character—who must evidently have been a native of Ecclefechan—he is as superior to the *malade imaginaire*, or to any of the Sganarelles of Molière, as is Molière himself to Jonson in lightness of spontaneous movement and easy grace of inspiration. And this is perhaps the only play of Jonson's which will keep the reader or spectator for whole scenes together in an inward riot or an open passion of subdued or unrepressed laughter.

The Speeches at Prince Henry's Barriers.

The speeches at Prince Henry's Barriers, written by the Laureate for the occasion of the heir apparent's investiture as Prince of Wales, are noticeable for their fine and dexterous fusion of legend with history in eloquent and weighty verse. But the *Masque of Oberon*, presented the day before

the tournament in which the prince bore himself so gallantly as to excite 'the great wonder of the beholders,' is memorable for a quality far higher than this: it is unsurpassed if not unequalled by any other work of its author for brightness and lightness and grace of fancy, for lyric movement and happy simplicity of expression.

The Masque of Oberon.

Such work, however, was but the byplay in which the genius of this indefatigable poet found its natural relaxation during the year which gave to the world for all time a gift so munificent as that of *The Alchemist.* This 'unequalled play,' as it was called by contemporary admirers, was not miscalled by their enthusiasm; it is in some respects unparalleled among all the existing masterpieces of comedy. No student worthy of the name who may agree with me in preferring *The Fox* to *The Alchemist* will wish to enforce his preference upon others. Such perfection of plot, with such multiplicity of characters—such ingenuity of incident, with such harmony of construction—can be matched, we may surely venture to say, nowhere in the whole vast range of comic invention—nowhere in the whole wide world of dramatic fiction. If the interest is less poignant than in

The Alchemist.

Volpone, the fun less continuous than in *The Silent Woman*, the action less simple and spontaneous than that of *Every Man in his Humour*, the vein of comedy is even richer than in any of these other masterpieces. The great Sir Epicure is enough in himself to immortalize the glory of the great artist who conceived and achieved a design so fresh, so daring, so colossal in its humour as that of this magnificent character. And there are at least nine others in the play as perfect in drawing, as vivid in outline, as living in every limb and every feature, as even his whose poetic stature overtops them all. The deathless three confederates, Kastrill and Surly, Dapper and Drugger, the too perennial Puritans whose villainous whine of purity and hypocrisy has its living echoes even now—not a figure among them could have been carved or coloured by any other hand.

Nor is the list even yet complete of Jonson's poetic work during this truly wonderful year of his literary life. At Christmas he produced 'the Queen's Majesty's masque' of *Love freed from Ignorance and Folly*; a little dramatic poem composed in his lightest and softest vein of fancy, brilliant and melodious throughout. The mighty and majestic Poet Lau-

Love freed from Ignorance and Folly.

reate would hardly, I fear, have accepted with benignity the tribute of a compliment to the effect that his use of the sweet and simple heptasyllabic metre was worthy of Richard Barnfield or George Wither: but it is certain that in purity and fluency of music his verse can seldom be compared, as here it justly may, with the clear flutelike notes of *Cynthia* and *The Shepherd's Hunting*. An absurd misprint in the last line but three has afflicted all Jonson's editors with unaccountable perplexity. 'Then, then, angry music sound,' sings the chorus at the close of a song in honour of 'gentle Love and Beauty.' It is inconceivable that no one should yet have discovered the obvious solution of so slight but unfortunate an error in the type as the substitution of 'angry' for 'airy.'

Catiline.

The tragedy of *Catiline his Conspiracy* gave evidence in the following year that the author of *Sejanus* could do better, but could not do much better, on the same rigid lines of rhetorical and studious work which he had followed in the earlier play. Fine as is the opening of this too laborious tragedy, the stately verse has less of dramatic movement than of such as might be proper —if such a thing could be—for epic satire cast into the form of dialogue. Catiline is so mere a monster

of ravenous malignity and irrational atrocity that he simply impresses us as an irresponsible though criminal lunatic: and there is something so preposterous, so abnormal, in the conduct and language of all concerned in his conspiracy, that nothing attributed to them seems either rationally credible or logically incredible. Coleridge, in his notes on the first act of this play, expresses his conviction that one passage must surely have fallen into the wrong place—such action at such a moment being impossible for any human creature. But the whole atmosphere is unreal, the whole action unnatural: no one thing said or done is less unlike the truth of life than any other: the writing is immeasurably better than the style of the ranting tragedian Seneca, but the treatment of character is hardly more serious as a study of humanity than his. In fact, what we find here is exactly what we find in the least successful of Jonson's comedies: a study, not of humanity, but of humours. The bloody humour of Cethegus, the braggart humour of Curius, the sluggish humour of Lentulus, the swaggering humour of Catiline himself—a huffcap hero as ever mouthed and strutted out his hour on the stage—all these alike fall under the famous definition of his favourite phrase which

the poet had given twelve years before in the induction to the second of his acknowledged comedies. And a tragedy of humours is hardly less than a monster in nature—or rather in that art which 'itself is nature.' Otherwise the second act must be pronounced excellent: the humours of the rival harlots, the masculine ambition of Sempronia, the caprices and cajoleries of Fulvia, are drawn with Jonson's most self-conscious care and skill. But the part of Cicero is burden enough to stifle any play: and some even of the finest passages, such as the much-praised description of the dying Catiline, fine though they be, are not good in the stricter sense of the word; the rhetorical sublimity of their diction comes most perilously near the verge of bombast. Altogether, the play is another magnificent mistake: and each time we open or close it we find it more difficult to believe that the additions made by its author some ten years before to *The Spanish Tragedy* can possibly have been those printed in the later issues of that famous play.[1] Their subtle and

[1] No student will need to be reminded of what is apparently unknown to some writers who have thought fit to offer an opinion on this subject—that different additions were made at different dates, and by different hands, to certain popular plays of the time. The original *Faustus* of Marlowe was altered and re-altered, at least

spontaneous notes of nature, their profound and searching pathos, their strange and thrilling tone of reality, the beauty and the terror and the truth of every touch, are the signs of a great, a very great tragic poet: and it is all but unimaginable that such an one could have been, but a year or so afterwards, the author of *Sejanus*—and again, eight years later, the author of *Catiline*. There is fine occasional writing in each, but it is not dramatic: and there is good dramatic work in each, but it is not tragic.

For two years after the appearance of *Catiline* there is an interval of silence and inaction in the literary life of its author; an intermission of labour which we cannot pretend to explain in the case of this Herculean workman, who seems usually to have taken an austere and strenuous delight in the employment and exhibition of his colossal energies. His next work is one of which it seems all but impossible for criticism to speak with neither more nor less than justice. Gifford himself, the most devoted of editors and of partisans, to

three times, by three if not more purveyors of interpolated and incongruous matter: and even that superb masterpiece would hardly seem to have rivalled the popularity of Kyd's tragedy—a popularity by no means unmerited.

whom all serious students of Jonson owe a tribute of gratitude and respect, seems to have wavered in his judgment on this point to a quite unaccountable degree. In his memoirs of Ben Jonson *Bartholomew Fair* is described as 'a popular piece, but chiefly remarkable for the obloquy to which it has given birth.' In his final note on the play, he expresses an opinion that it has 'not unjustly' been considered as 'nearly on a level with those exquisite dramas, *The Fox* and *The Alchemist*.' Who shall decide when not only do doctors disagree, but the most self-confident of doctors in criticism disagrees with himself to so singular an extent? The dainty palate of Leigh Hunt was naturally nauseated by the undoubtedly greasy flavour of the dramatic viands here served up in such prodigality of profusion: and it must be confessed that some of the meat is too high and some of the sauces are too rank for any but a very strong digestion. But those who turn away from the table in sheer disgust at the coarseness of the fare will lose the enjoyment of some of the richest and strongest humour, some of the most brilliant and varied realism, that ever claimed the attention or excited the admiration of the study or the stage. That

Bartholomew Fair.

'superlunatical hypocrite,' the immortal and only too immortal Rabbi Busy, towers above the minor characters of the play as the execrable fanaticism which he typifies and embodies was destined to tower above reason and humanity, charity and common sense, in its future influence on the social life of England. But in sheer force and fidelity of presentation this wonderful study from nature can hardly be said to exceed the others which surround and set it off; the dotard Littlewit, the booby Cokes, the petulant fidelity and pig-headed self-confidence of Waspe, the various humours and more various villainies of the multitudinous and riotous subordinates; above all, that enterprising and intelligent champion of social purity, the conscientious and clear-sighted Justice Adam Overdo. When all is said that can reasonably be said against the too accurate reproduction and the too voluminous exposition of vulgar and vicious nature in this enormous and multitudinous pageant—too serious in its satire and too various in its movement for a farce, too farcical in its incidents and too violent in its horseplay for a comedy—the delightful humour of its finer scenes, the wonderful vigour and veracity of the whole, the unsurpassed ingenuity and dexterity of the composition, the

energy, harmony, and versatility of the action, must be admitted to ensure its place for ever among the minor and coarser masterpieces of comic art.

Love Restored.

The masque of *Love Restored*, to which no date is assigned by the author or his editors, has some noticeable qualities in common with the play which has just been considered, and ought perhaps to have taken precedence of it in our descriptive catalogue. Robin Goodfellow's adventures at court are described with such realistic as well as fantastic humour that his narrative might have made part of the incidents or episodes of the Fair without any impropriety or incongruity; but the lyric fancy and the spirited allegory which enliven this delightful little miniature of a play make it more heartily and more simply enjoyable than many or indeed than most of its author's works. Three other masques were certainly produced during the course of the year 1614. *A Challenge at Tilt at a Marriage*, which was produced eight years after the *Masque of Hymen*, opened the new year with a superb display in honour of the second nuptials of the lady whose previous marriage, now cancelled as a nullity,

A Challenge at Tilt at a Marriage.

had been acclaimed by the poet with such superfluous munificence of congratulation and of augury as might have made him hesitate, or at least might make us wish that he had seen fit to hesitate, before undertaking the celebration of the bride's remarriage—even had it not been made infamously memorable by association with matters less familiar to England at any time than to Rome under Pope Alexander VI. or to Paris under Queen Catherine de' Medici. But from the literary point of view, as distinguished from the ethical or the historical, we have less reason to regret than to rejoice in so graceful an example of the poet's abilities as a writer of bright, facile, ingenious and exquisite prose. *The Irish Masque*, presented four days later, may doubtless have been written with no sarcastic intention; but if there was really no such under-current of suggestion or intimation designed or imagined by the writer, we can only find a still keener savour of satire, a still clearer indication of insight, in the characteristic representation of a province whose typical champions fall to wrangling and exchange of reciprocal insults over the display of their ruffianly devotion: while there is not merely a tone of official rebuke or courtly compli-

The Irish Masque.

ment, but a note of genuine good feeling and serious good sense, in the fine solid blank verse delivered by 'a civil gentleman of the nation.'

Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists.

On Twelfth Night the comic masque of *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists* gave evidence that the creator of Subtle had not exhausted his arsenal of ridicule, but had yet some shafts of satire left for the professors of Subtle's art or mystery. The humour here is somewhat elaborate, though unquestionably spirited and ingenious.

The next year's is again a blank record; but the year 1616, though to us more mournfully memorable for the timeless death of Shakespeare, is also for the student of Ben Jonson a date of exceptional importance and interest. The production of two masques and a comedy in verse, with the publication of the magnificent first edition of his collected plays and poems, must have kept his name more continuously if not more vividly before the world than in any preceding year of his literary life. The masque of *The Golden Age Restored*, presented on New Year's Night and again on Twelfth Night, is equally ingenious and equally spirited in its happy simplicity of construction and in the vigorous

The Golden Age Restored.

fluency of its versification; which is generally smooth, and in the lyrical dialogue from after the first dance to the close may fairly be called sweet; an epithet very seldom applicable to the solid and polished verse of Jonson. And if *The Devil is an Ass* cannot be ranked among the crowning masterpieces of its author, it is not because the play shows any sign of decadence in literary power or in humorous invention: the writing is admirable, the wealth of comic matter is only too copious, the characters are as firm in outline and as rich in colour as any but the most triumphant examples of his satirical or sympathetic skill in finished delineation and demarcation of humours. On the other hand, it is of all Ben Jonson's comedies since the date of *Cynthia's Revels* the most obsolete in subject of satire, the most temporary in its allusions and applications: the want of fusion or even connection (except of the most mechanical or casual kind) between the various parts of its structure and the alternate topics of its ridicule makes the action more difficult to follow than that of many more complicated plots: and, finally, the admixture of serious sentiment and noble emotion is not so

The Devil is an Ass.

skilfully managed as to evade the imputation of incongruity. Nevertheless, there are touches in the dialogue between Lady Tailbush and Lady Eitherside in the first scene of the fourth act which are worthy of Molière himself, and suggestive of the method and the genius to which we owe the immortal enjoyment derived from the society of Cathos and Madelon—I should say, Polixène and Aminte, of Célimène and Arsinoé, and of Philaminte and Bélise. The third scene of the same act is so nobly written that the reader may feel half inclined to condone or to forget the previous humiliation of the too compliant heroine—her servile and undignified submission to the infamous imbecility of her husband—in admiration of the noble and natural eloquence with which the poet has here endowed her. But this husband, comical as are the scenes in which he develops and dilates from the part of a dupe to the part of an impostor, is a figure almost too loathsome to be ludicrous—or at least, however ludicrous, to be fit for the leading part in a comedy of ethics as well as of manners. And the prodigality of elaboration lavished on such a multitude of subordinate characters, at the expense of all continuous interest and to the sacrifice of all dramatic harmony, may

tempt the reader to apostrophize the poet in his own words:—

> You are so covetous still to embrace
> More than you can, that you lose all.

Yet a word of parting praise must be given to Satan: a small part as far as extent goes, but a splendid example of high comic imagination after the order of Aristophanes, admirably relieved by the low comedy of the asinine Pug and the voluble doggrel of the antiquated Vice.

Not till nine years after the appearance of this play, in which the genius of the author may be said—in familiar phraseology—to have fallen between two stools, carrying either too much suggestion of human interest for a half allegorical satire, or not enough to give actual interest to the process of the satirical allegory, did Ben Jonson produce on the stage a masterpiece of comedy in which this danger was avoided, this difficulty overcome, with absolute and triumphant facility of execution. In the meantime, however, he had produced nine masques—or ten, counting that which appeared in the same year with his last great work of comic art. The *Masque of Christmas*, which belongs to the same year as the two works last mentioned, is a com-

The Masque of Christmas.

fortable little piece of genial comic realism; pleasant, quaint, and homely: the good-humoured humour of little Robin Cupid and his honest old mother 'Venus, a deaf tirewoman,' is more agreeable than many more studious and elaborate examples of the author's fidelity as a painter or photographer of humble life. Next year, in the masque of *Lovers made Men*, called by Gifford *The Masque of Lethe*, he gave full play to his lighter genius and lyric humour: it is a work of exceptionally simple, natural, and graceful fancy. In the following year he brought out the much-admired *Vision of Delight*; a very fair example of his capacities and incapacities. The fanciful, smooth, and flowing verse of its graver parts would be worthy of Fletcher, were it not that the music is less fresh and pure in melody, and that among the finest and sweetest passages there are interspersed such lamentably flat and stiff couplets as would have been impossible to any other poet of equal rank. If justice has not been done in modern times to Ben Jonson as one of the greatest of dramatists and humourists, much more than justice has been done to him as a lyric poet. The famous song of Night in this masque opens and closes most beautifully and

Lovers made Men.

The Vision of Delight.

most sweetly: but two out of the eleven lines which compose it, the fifth and the sixth, are positively and intolerably bad. The barbarous and pedantic license of inversion which disfigures his best lyrics with such verses as these—'Create of airy forms a stream,' 'But might I of Jove's nectar sup'—is not a fault of the age but a vice of the poet. Marlowe and Lyly, Shakespeare and Webster, Fletcher and Dekker, could write songs as free from this blemish as Tennyson's or Shelley's. There is no surer test of the born lyric poet than the presence or absence of an instinctive sense which assures him when and how and where to use or to abstain from inversion. And in Jonson it was utterly wanting.

The next year's masque, *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue*, would be very graceful in composition if it were not rather awkward in construction. The verses in praise of dancing are very pretty, sedate, and polished: and the burlesque part (spoken by 'Messer Gaster' in person) has more than usual of Rabelaisian freedom and energy. The antimasque afterwards prefixed to it, *For the Honour of Wales*, is somewhat ponderous in its jocularity, but has genuine touches of humour and serious notes of character in its 'tedious and brief' display of the

Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue.

For the Honour of Wales.

poet's incomparable industry and devotion to the study of dialects and details: and the close is noble and simple in its patriotic or provincial eloquence. But in the year 1620 the comic genius of Jonson shone out once more in all the splendour of its strength. The only masque of that year, *News from the New World discovered in the Moon*, is worthy of a prose Aristophanes: in other words, it is a satire such as Aristophanes might have written, if that greater poet had ever condescended to write prose. Here for once the generous words of Jonson's noble panegyric on Shakespeare may justly be applied to himself: in his own immortal phrase, the humour of this little comedy is 'not of an age, but for all time.' At the very opening we find ourselves on but too familiar ground, and feel that the poet must have shot himself forward by sheer inspiration into our own enlightened age, when we hear 'a printer of news' avowing the notable fact that 'I do hearken after them, wherever they be, at any rates; I'll give anything for a good copy now, be it true or false, so it be news.' Are not these, the reader must ask himself, the accents of some gutter gaolbird—some dunghill gazetteer of this very present day? Or is the avowal too honest in its impudence for such

News from the New World discovered in the Moon.

lips as these? After this, the anticipation of something like railways ('coaches' that 'go only with wind')—if not also of something like balloons ('a castle in the air that runs upon wheels, with a winged lanthorn')—seems but a commonplace example of prophetic instinct.

A Masque of the Metamorphosed Gipsies.

The longest of Ben Jonson's masques was expanded to its present bulk by the additions made at each successive representation before the king; to whose not over delicate or fastidious taste this *Masque of the Metamorphosed Gipsies* would seem to have given incomparable if not inexhaustible delight. And even those readers who may least enjoy the decidedly greasy wit or humour of some among its once most popular lyrical parts must admire and cannot but enjoy the rare and even refined loveliness of others. The fortune most unfortunately told of his future life and death to the future King Charles I. is told in the very best lyric verse that the poet could command: a strain of quite exceptional sweetness, simplicity, and purity of music: to which, as we read it now, the record of history seems to play a most tragically ironical accompaniment, in a minor key of subdued and sardonic presage. And besides these graver and lovelier interludes of poetry which

relieve the somewhat obtrusive realism of the broader comic parts, this masque has other claims on our notice and remembrance; the ingenuity and dexterity, the richness of resource and the pliability of humour, which inform and animate all its lyric prophecies or compliments.

The Masque of Augurs.

The masque which appeared in the following year is a monument of learning and labour such as no other poet could have dreamed of lavishing on a ceremonial or official piece of work, and which can only be appreciated by careful reading and thorough study of the copious notes and references appended to the text. But the writer's fancy was at a low ebb when it could devise nothing better than is to be found in this *Masque of Augurs*: the humour is coarse and clumsy, the verses are flat and stiff. In the next year's Twelfth-Night masque, *Time vindicated to himself and to his honours*, the vigorous and vicious personalities of the attack on George Wither give some life to the part in which the author of *Abuses Stript and Whipt* is brought in under the name of Chronomastix to make mirth for the groundlings of the Court. The feeble and facile fluency of his pedestrian Muse in the least fortunate hours of her

Time vindicated to himself and to his honours.

too voluble and voluminous improvisation is not unfairly caricatured; but the Laureate's malevolence is something too obvious in his ridicule of the 'soft ambling verse' whose 'rapture' at its highest has the quality denied by nature to Jonson's—the divine gift of melodious and passionate simplicity. A better and happier use for his yet unimpaired faculty of humour was found in the following year's masque of *Neptune's Triumph for the Return of Albion*; which contains the most famous and eloquent panegyric on the art of cookery that ever anticipated the ardours of Thackeray and the enthusiasm of Dumas. The passage is a really superb example of tragicomic or mock-heroic blank verse; and in the closing lyrics of the masque there is no lack of graceful fancy and harmonious elegance. For the next year's masque of *Pan's Anniversary, or The Shepherd's Holiaay*, not quite so much can reasonably be said. It is a typical and a flagrant instance of the poet's proverbial and incurable tendency to overdo everything: there is but artificial smoothness in the verse, and but clownish ingenuity in the prose of it.

Neptune's Triumph for the Return of Albion.

Pan's Anniversary.

But the year 1625 is memorable to the students

and admirers of Ben Jonson for the appearance of a work worth almost all his masques together; a work in which the author of *The Fox* and *The Alchemist* once more reasserted his claim to a seat which no other poet and no other dramatist could dispute. The last complete and finished masterpiece of his genius is the splendid comedy of *The Staple of News*. This, rather than *The Silent Woman*, is the play which should be considered as the third—or perhaps we should say the fourth—of the crowning works which represent the consummate and incomparable powers of its author. No man can know anything worth knowing of Ben Jonson who has not studied and digested the text of *Every Man in his Humour*, *The Fox*, *The Alchemist*, and *The Staple of News*: but any man who has may be said to know him well. To a cursory or an incompetent reader it may appear at first sight that the damning fault of *The Devil is an Ass* is also the fault of this later comedy: that we have here again an infelicitous and an incongruous combination of realistic satire with Aristophanic allegory, and that the harmony of the different parts, the unity of the composite action, which a pupil of Aristophanes should at least have striven to attain—or, if he could not, at

The Staple of News.

least to imitate and to respect—can here be considered as conspicuous only by their absence. But no careful and candid critic will retain such an impression after due study has been given to the third poetic comedy which reveals to us the genius of Jonson, not merely as a realistic artist in prose or a master of magnificent farce, but as a great comic poet. The scheme of his last preceding comedy had been vitiated by a want of coherence between the actual and the allegorical, the fantastic and the literal point of view; and the result was confusion without fusion of parts: here, on the other hand, we have fusion without confusion between the dramatic allegory suggested by Aristophanes, the admirably fresh and living presentation of the three Pennyboys, and the prophetic satire of the newsmarket or Stock Exchange of journalism. The competent reader will be divided between surprise at the possibility and delight in the perfection of the success achieved by a poet who has actually endowed with sufficiency of comic life and humorous reality a whole group of symbolic personifications; from the magnificent Infanta herself, Aurelia Clara Pecunia, most gracious and generous yet most sensitive and discreet of imperial damsels, even down to little 'blushet' Rose Wax

the chambermaid. Her young suitor is at least as good a picture of a generous light-headed prodigal as ever was shown on any stage: as much of a man as Charles Surface, and very much more of a gentleman. The miserly uncle, though very well drawn, is less exceptionally well drawn: but Pennyboy Canter, the disguised father, is equally delightful from the moment of his entrance with an extempore carol of salutation on his lips to those in which he appears to rescue the misused Infanta from the neglectful favourite of her choice, and reappears at the close of the play to rescue his son, redeem his brother, and scatter the community of jeerers: to whose humour Gifford is somewhat less than just when he compares it with 'the *vapouring* in *Bartholomew Fair*': for it is neither coarse nor tedious, and takes up but very little space; and that not unamusingly. As for the great scene of the Staple, it is one of the most masterly in ancient or modern comedy of the typical or satirical kind. The central 'Office' here opened, to the great offence (it should seem) of 'most of the spectators'—a fact which, as Gifford justly remarks, 'argues very little for the good sense of the audience,'—may be regarded by a modern student as representing the narrow little

nest in which was laid the modest little egg of modern journalism—that bird of many notes and many feathers, now so like an eagle and now so like a vulture: now soaring as a falcon or sailing as a pigeon over continents and battle-fields, now grovelling and groping as a dunghill kite, with its beak in a very middenstead of falsehood and of filth. The vast range of Ben Jonson's interest and observation is here as manifest as the wide scope and infinite variety of his humour. Science and warfare, Spinola and Galileo, come alike within reach of its notice, and serve alike for the material of its merriment. The invention of torpedos is anticipated by two centuries and a half; while in the assiduity of the newsmongers who traffic in eavesdropping detail we acknowledge a resemblance to that estimable race of tradesmen known to Parisian accuracy as interwieveurs. And the lunacy of apocalyptic interpreters or prophets is gibbeted side by side with the fanatical ignorance of missionary enthusiasm, with impostures of professional quackery and speculations in personal libel. Certainly, if ever Ben deserved the prophetic title of Vates, it was in this last magnificent work of his maturest genius. Never had his style or his verse been riper or richer, more vigorous or more

pure. And even the interludes in which we hear the commentary and gather the verdict of 'these ridiculous gossips' (as their creator calls them) 'who tattle between the acts' are incomparably superior to his earlier efforts or excursions in the same field of humorous invention. The intrusive commentators on *Every Man out of his Humour*, for instance, are mere nullities—the awkward and abortive issue of unconscious uneasiness and inartistic egoism. But Expectation, Mirth, Tattle, and Censure, are genuine and living sketches of natural and amusing figures: and their dialogues, for appropriate and spirited simplicity, are worthy of comparison with even those of a similar nature which we owe not more to the genius than to the assailants of Molière.

In 1625 Ben Jonson had brought out his last great comedy: in 1626 he brought out the last of his finer sort of masques. The little so-called *Masque of Owls*, which precedes it in the table of contents, is (as Gifford points out) no masque at all: it is a quaint effusion of doggrel dashed with wit and streaked with satire. But in *The Fortunate Isles, and their Union*, the humour and the verse are alike excellent: the jest on

The Masque of Owls.

The Fortunate Isles, and their Union.

Plato's ideas would have delighted Landor, and the wish of Merefool to 'see a Brahman or a Gymnosophist' is worthy of a modern believer in esoteric Buddhism. Few if any of the masques have in them lyrics of smoother and clearer flow; and the construction is no less graceful than ingenious. The next reappearance of the poet, after a silence during three years of broken or breaking health, was so memorably unfortunate in its issue that the name and the fate of a play which was only too naturally and deservedly hooted off the stage are probably familiar to many who know nothing of the masterpiece which had last preceded it. Ever since Lamb gathered some excerpts from the more high-toned and elaborate passages of *The New Inn, or The Light Heart*, *The New Inn.* and commended in them 'the poetical fancy and elegance of mind of the supposed rugged old bard,' it has been the fashion to do justice if not something more than justice to the literary qualities of this play; which no doubt contains much vigorous and some graceful writing, and may now and then amuse a tolerant reader by its accumulating and culminating absurdities of action and catastrophe, character and event. But that the work shows portentous signs of mental decay, or at all events

of temporary collapse in judgment and in sense, can be questioned by no sane reader of so much as the argument. To rank any preceding play of Jonson's among those dismissed by Dryden as his 'dotages' would be to attribute to Dryden a verdict displaying the veriest imbecility of impudence: but to *The New Inn* that rough and somewhat brutal phrase is on the whole but too plausibly applicable.

Love's Triumph through Callipolis.

At the beginning of the next year Jonson came forward in his official capacity as court poet or laureate, and produced 'the Queen's Masque,' *Love's Triumph through Callipolis*, and again, at Shrovetide, 'the King's Masque,' *Chloridia*. A few good verses, faint echoes of a former song, redeem the first of these from the condemnation of compassion or contempt: and there is still some evidence in its composition of conscientious energy and of capacity not yet reduced from the stage of decadence to the stage of collapse. But the hymn which begins fairly enough with imitation of an earlier and nobler strain of verse at once subsides into commonplace, and closes in doggrel which would have disgraced a Sylvester or a Quarles. It is impossible to read *Chloridia* without a regretful reflection on the lapse of time which prevented it from being a

Chloridia.

beautiful and typical instance of the author's lyric power: but, however inferior it may be to what he would have made of so beautiful a subject in the freshness and fullness of his inventive and fanciful genius, it is still ingenious and effective after a fashion; and the first song is so genuinely graceful and simple as to remind us of Wordsworth in his more pedestrian but not uninspired moods or measures of lyrical or elegiac verse.

The higher genius of Ben Jonson as a comic poet was yet once more to show itself in one brilliant flash of parting splendour before its approaching sunset. No other of his works would seem to have met with such all but universal neglect as *The Magnetic Lady*; I do not remember to have ever seen it quoted or referred to, except once by Dryden, who in his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* cites from it an example of narrative substituted for action, 'where one comes out from dinner, and relates the quarrels and disorders of it, to save the undecent appearance of them on the stage, and to abbreviate the story.' And yet any competent spectator of its opening scenes must have felt a keen satisfaction at the apparent revival of the comic power and renewal of the dramatic instinct so lamentably enfeebled

The Magnetic Lady.

and eclipsed on the last occasion of a new play from the same hand. The first act is full of brilliant satirical description and humorous analysis of humours: the commentator Compass, to whom we owe these masterly summaries of character, is an excellent counterpart of that 'reasonable man' who so constantly reappears on the stage of Molière to correct with his ridicule or control by his influence the extravagant or erratic tendencies of his associates. Very few examples of Jonson's grave and deliberate humour are finer than the ironical counsel given by Compass to the courtly fop whom he dissuades from challenging the soldier who has insulted him, on the ground that the soldier

> has killed so many
> As it is ten to one his turn is next:
> You never fought with any, less, slew any;
> And therefore have the [fairer] hopes before you.

The rest of the speech, with all that follows to the close of the scene, is no less ripe and rich in sedate and ingenious irony. There is no less admirable humour in the previous discourse of the usurer in praise of wealth—especially as being the only real test of a man's character:—

> For, be he rich, he straight with evidence knows
> Whether he have any compassion

> Or inclination unto virtue, or no:
> Where the poor knave erroneously believes
> If he were rich he would build churches, or
> Do such mad things.

Most of the characters are naturally and vigorously drawn in outline or in profile: Dame Polish is a figure well worthy the cordial and lavish commendation of Gifford: and the action is not only original and ingenious, but during the first four acts at any rate harmonious and amusing. The fifth act seems to me somewhat weaker; but the interludes are full of spirit, good humour, and good sense.

A Tale of a Tub, which appeared in the following year, is a singular sample of farce elaborated and exalted into comedy. This rustic study, though 'not liked' by the king and queen when acted before them at court, has very real merits in a homely way. The list of characters looks unpromising, and reminds us to regret that the old poet could not be induced to profit by Feltham's very just and reasonable animadversions on 'all your jests so nominal'; which deface this play no less than *The New Inn*, and repel the most tolerant reader by their formal and laborious puerility. But the action opens brightly and briskly: the dispute about 'Zin Valentine' is only less good in its way than one

A Tale of a Tub.

of George Eliot's exquisite minor touches—Mr. Dempster's derivation of the word Presbyterian from one Jack Presbyter of historic infamy: the young squire's careful and testy 'man and governor' is no unworthy younger brother of Numps in *Bartholomew Fair*: and the rustic heroine, a figure sketched with rough realistic humour, is hardly less than delightful when she remarks, after witnessing the arrest of her intended bridegroom on a charge of highway robbery, 'He might have married one first, and have been hanged after, if he had had a mind to 't;' a reflection worthy of Congreve or Vanbrugh, Miss Hoyden or Miss Prue. But Jonson had never laid to heart the wisdom expressed in the admirable proverb—'Qui trop embrasse mal étreint;' the simple subject of the play and the homely motive of the action are overlaid and overloaded by the multiplicity of minor characters and episodical superfluities, and the upshot of all the poet's really ingenious contrivances is pointless as well as farcical and flat as well as trivial. But there is certainly no sign of dotage in any work of Ben Jonson's produced before or after the lamentable date of *The New Inn*. The author apologizes for the homely and rustic quality of his

uncourtly play; but if it be a failure, it is not on account of its plebeian humility, but through the writer's want of any real sympathy with his characters, any hearty relish of his subject: because throughout the whole conduct of a complicated intrigue he shows himself ungenially observant and contemptuously studious of his models: because the qualities most needed for such work, transparent lucidity and straightforward simplicity of exposition, are not to be found in these last comedies: because, for instance, as much attention is needed to appreciate the ingenious process of 'humours reconciled' in *The Magnetic Lady*, or to follow the no less ingenious evolution of boorish rivalries and clownish intrigues in the play just noticed, as to follow the action and appreciate the design of *The Fox* or *The Alchemist*.

Love's Welcome at Welbeck.

Love's Welcome at Bolsover.

The masque of this year, *Love's Welcome at Welbeck*, is a thing of very slight pretentions, but not unsuccessful or undiverting after its homely fashion. In the next year's companion masque, *Love's Welcome at Bolsover*, the verse, though not wanting in grace or ease, is less remarkable than the rough personal satire on Inigo Jones; who, it may be observed, is as ready with a quotation from

Chaucer as Goody Polish in *The Magnetic Lady* or Lovel in *The New Inn.*

Of this great dramatist's other than dramatic work in poetry or in prose this is not the place to speak: and his two posthumous fragments of dramatic poetry, interesting and characteristic as they are, can hardly affect for the better or for the worse our estimate of his powers. Had *Mortimer his Fall* been completed, we should undoubtedly have had a third example of rhetorical drama, careful, conscientious, energetic, impassive and impressive; worthy to stand beside the author's two Roman tragedies: and Mortimer might have confronted and outfaced Sejanus and Catiline in sonorous audacity of rhythmic self-assertion and triumphant ostentation of magnificent vacuity. In *The Sad Shepherd* we find the faults and the merits of his best and his worst masques so blended and confounded that we cannot but perceive the injurious effect on the Laureate's genius or instinct of intelligence produced by the habit of conventional invention which the writing of verse to order and the arrangement of effects for a pageant had now made inevitable and incurable. A masque including an antimasque, in which the serious part

Mortimer his Fall.

The Sad Shepherd.

is relieved and set off by the introduction of parody or burlesque, was a form of art or artificial fashion in which incongruity was a merit; the grosser the burlesque, the broader the parody, the greater was the success and the more effective was the result: but in a dramatic attempt of higher pretention than such as might be looked for in the literary groundwork or raw material for a pageant, this intrusion of incongruous contrast is a pure barbarism—a positive solecism in composition. The collocation of such names and such figures as those of Æglamour and Earine with such others as Much and Maudlin, Scathlock and Scarlet, is no whit less preposterous or less ridiculous, less inartistic or less irritating, than the conjunction in Dekker's *Satiromastix* of Peter Flash and Sir Quintilian, Sir Adam Prickshaft and Sir Vaughan ap Rees, with Crispinus and Demetrius, Asinius and Horace: and the offence is graver, more inexcusable and more inexplicable, in a work of pure fancy or imagination, than in a work of poetic invention crossed and chequered with controversial satire. Yet Gifford, who can hardly find words or occasions sufficient to express his sense of Dekker's 'inconceivable folly,' or his contempt for 'a plot that can scarcely be equalled

in absurdity by the worst of the plays which Dekker was ever employed to "dress,"' has not a syllable of reprehension for the portentous incongruities of this mature and elaborate poem. On the other hand, even Gifford's editorial enthusiasm could not overestimate the ingenious excellence of construction, the masterly harmony of composition, which every reader of the argument must have observed with such admiration as can but intensify his regret that scarcely half of the projected poem has come down to us. No work of Ben Jonson's is more amusing and agreeable to read, as none is more nobly graceful in expression or more excellent in simplicity of style.

The immense influence of this great writer on his own generation is not more evident or more memorable than is the refraction or reverberation of that influence on the next. This 'sovereign sway and masterdom,' this overpowering preponderance of reputation, could not but be and could not but pass away. No giant had ever the divine versatility of a Shakespeare: but of all the giant brood none ever showed so much diversity of power as Jonson. In no single work has he displayed such masterly variety of style as has Byron in his two great poems, *Don Juan* and *The Vision*

of Judgment: the results of his attempts at mixture or fusion of poetry with farce will stand exposed in all their deformity and discrepancy if we set them beside the triumphant results of Shakespeare's. That faultless felicity of divine caprice which harmonizes into such absolute congruity all the outwardly incompatible elements of such works as *Twelfth Night* and *The Tempest*, the *Winter's Tale* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is perhaps of all Shakespeare's incomparable gifts the one most utterly beyond reach of other poets. But when we consider the various faculties and powers of Jonson's genius and intelligence, when we examine severally the divers forces and capacities enjoyed and exercised by this giant workman in the performance of his work, we are amazed into admiration only less in its degree than we feel for the greatest among poets. It is not admiration of the same kind: there is less in it of love and worship than we give to the gods of song; but it is with deep reverence and with glowing gratitude that we salute in this Titan of the English stage 'il maestro di color che sanno.'

II

MISCELLANEOUS WORKS

II

MISCELLANEOUS WORKS

AMONG the great dramatic poets of the Shakespearean age there are several who would still have a claim to enduring remembrance as poets, even had they never written a line for the theatre: there are two only who would hold a high rank among the masters of English prose. For Nash was not a poet or a dramatist who wandered occasionally into prose by way of change or diversion: he was a master of prose who strayed now and then into lyric or dramatic verse. Heywood, Middleton, and Ford have left us more or less curious and valuable works in prose; essays and pamphlets or chronicles and compilations: but these are works of historic interest rather than literary merit; or, if this be too strong and sweeping an expression, they are works of less intrinsic than empirical value. But if all his plays were lost to us, the author of Ben Jonson's

Explorata, or Discoveries, would yet retain a seat among English prose-writers beside the author of Bacon's Essays: the author of *The Gull's Horn-book* and *The Bachelor's Banquet* would still stand high in the foremost rank of English humourists.

Epigrams.

The book of epigrams published by Jonson in the collected edition of his select works up to the date of the year 1616 is by no means an attractive introduction or an alluring prelude to the voluminous collection of miscellanies which in all modern editions it precedes. 'It is to be lamented,' in Gifford's opinion, 'on many accounts,' that the author has not left us 'a further selection.' It is in my opinion to be deplored that he should have left us so large a selection—if that be the proper term—as he has seen fit to bequeath to a naturally and happily limited set of readers. 'Sunt bona, sunt quædam mediocria, sunt mala plura': and the worst are so bad, so foul if not so dull, so stupid if not so filthy, that the student stands aghast with astonishment at the self-deceiving capacity of a writer who could prefix to such a collection the vaunt that his book was 'not covetous of least self-fame'—'much less' prone to indulgence in 'beastly phrase.' No man can ever have been less

amenable than Sir Walter Scott to the infamous charge of Puritanism or prudery; and it is he who has left on record his opinion that 'surely that coarseness of taste which tainted Ben Jonson's powerful mind is proved from his writings. Many authors of that age are indecent, but Jonson is filthy and gross in his pleasantry, and indulges himself in using the language of scavengers and nightmen.' I will only add that the evidence of this is flagrant in certain pages which I never forced myself to read through till I had undertaken to give a full and fair account—to the best of my ability—of Ben Jonson's complete works. How far poetry may be permitted to go in the line of sensual pleasure or sexual emotion may be debatable between the disciples of Ariosto and the disciples of Milton; but all English readers, I trust, will agree with me that coprology should be left to Frenchmen. Among them—that is, of course, among the baser sort of them—that unsavoury science will seemingly never lack disciples of the most nauseous, the most abject, the most deliberate bestiality. It is nothing less than lamentable that so great an English writer as Ben Jonson should ever have taken the plunge of a Parisian diver into the cesspool: but it is as

necessary to register as it is natural to deplore the detestable fact that he did so. The collection of his epigrams which bears only too noisome witness to this fact is nevertheless by no means devoid of valuable and admirable components. The sixty-fifth, a palinode or recantation of some previous panegyric, is very spirited and vigorous; and the verses of panegyric which precede and follow it are wanting neither in force nor in point. The poem 'on Lucy Countess of Bedford,' for which Gifford seems hardly able to find words adequate to his admiration, would be worthy of very high praise if the texture of its expression and versification were unstiffened and undisfigured by the clumsy license of awkward inversions. *The New Cry*, a brief and brilliant satire on political gossips of the *gobemouche* order, has one couplet worthy of Dryden himself, descriptive of such pretenders to statecraft as

> talk reserved, locked up, and full of fear,
> Nay, ask you how the day goes, in your ear;
> *Keep a Star-chamber sentence close twelve days,*
> *And whisper what a Proclamation says.*

The epitaph on little Salathiel Pavy, who had acted under his own name in the induction to *Cynthia's Revels*, is as deservedly famous as any

minor work of Jonson's; for sweetness and simplicity it has few if any equals among his lyrical attempts.

Of the fifteen lyric or elegiac poems which compose *The Forest*, there is none that is not worthy of all but the highest praise; there is none that is worthy of the highest. *The Forest.* To come so near so often and yet never to touch the goal of lyric triumph has never been the fortune and the misfortune of any other poet. Vigour of thought, purity of phrase, condensed and polished rhetoric, refined and appropriate eloquence, studious and serious felicity of expression, finished and fortunate elaboration of verse, might have been considered as qualities sufficient to secure a triumph for the poet in whose work all these excellent attributes are united and displayed; and we cannot wonder that younger men who had come within the circle of his personal influence should have thought that the combination of them all must ensure to their possessor a place above all his possible compeers. But among the humblest and most devout of these prostrate enthusiasts was one who had but to lay an idle and reckless hand on the instrument which hardly would answer the touch of his master's at all, and the very note of

lyric poetry as it should be—as it was in the beginning, as it is, and as it will be for ever—responded on the instant to the instinctive intelligence of his touch. As we turn from Gray to Collins, as we turn from Wordsworth to Coleridge, as we turn from Byron to Shelley, so do we turn from Jonson to Herrick; and so do we recognize the lyric poet as distinguished from the writer who may or may not have every gift but one in higher development of excellence and in fuller perfection of power, but who is utterly and absolutely transcended and shone down by his probably unconscious competitor on the proper and peculiar ground of pure and simple poetry.

But the special peculiarity of the case now before us is that it was so much the greater man who was distanced and eclipsed; and this not merely by a minor poet, but by a humble admirer and a studious disciple of his own. Herrick, as a writer of elegies, epithalamiums, panegyrical or complimentary verses, is as plainly and as openly an imitator of his model as ever was the merest parasite of any leading poet, from the days of Chaucer and his satellites to the days of Tennyson and his. No Lydgate or Lytton was ever more obsequious in his discipleship; but for all his

loving and loyal protestations of passionate humility and of ardent reverence, we see at every turn, at every step, at every change of note, that what the master could not do the pupil can. When Chapman set sail after Marlowe, he went floundering and lurching in the wake of a vessel that went straight and smooth before the fullest and the fairest wind of song; but when Herrick follows Jonson the manner of movement or the method of progression is reversed. Macaulay, in a well-known passage, has spoken of Ben Jonson's 'rugged rhymes'; but rugged is not exactly the most appropriate epithet. Donne is rugged: Jonson is stiff. And if ruggedness of verse is a damaging blemish, stiffness of verse is a destructive infirmity. Ruggedness is curable; witness Donne's *Anniversaries*: stiffness is incurable; witness Jonson's *Underwoods*. In these, as in the preceding series called *The Forest*, there is so lavish a display of such various powers as cannot but excite the admiration they demand and deserve. They have every quality, their author would undoubtedly have maintained, that a student of poetry ought to expect and to applaud. What they want is that magic without which the very best verse is as far beneath the very best prose as the verse

Underwoods.

which has it is above all prose that ever was or ever can be written. And there never was a generation of Englishmen in which this magic was a gift so common as it was in Jonson's. We have but to open either of the priceless volumes which we owe to the exquisite taste and the untiring devotion of Mr. Bullen, and we shall come upon scores after scores of 'lyrics from Elizabethan song-books' as far beyond comparison with the very best of Jonson's as Shakespeare is beyond comparison with Shirley, as Milton is beyond comparison with Glover, or as Coleridge is beyond comparison with Southey. There is exceptional ease of movement, exceptional grace of expression, in the lyric which evoked from Gifford the 'free' avowal, 'if it be not the most beautiful song in the language, I know not, for my part, where it is to be found.' Who on earth, then or now, would ever have supposed that the worthy Gifford did? But any one who does know anything more of the matter than the satirist and reviewer whose own amatory verses were 'lazy as Scheldt and cold as Don' will acknowledge that it would be difficult to enumerate the names of poets contemporary with Jonson, from Frank Davison to Robin Herrick, who have left us songs at least as beautiful as that beginning—'Oh do not wanton with those eyes, Lest I be sick

with seeing.' And in 'the admirable Epode,' as Gifford calls it, which concludes Ben Jonson's contributions to *Love's Martyr*, though there is remarkable energy of expression, the irregularity and inequality of style are at least as conspicuous as the occasional vigour and the casual felicity of phrase. But if all were as good as the best passages this early poem of Jonson's would undoubtedly be very good indeed. Take for instance the description or definition of true love:

> That is an essence far more gentle, fine, [1]
> Pure, perfect, nay divine;
> It is a golden chain let down from heaven,
> Whose links are bright and even,
> That falls like sleep on lovers.

Again:

> O, who is he that in this peace enjoys
> The elixir of all joys,
> (A form more fresh than are the Eden bowers
> And lasting as her flowers;
> Richer than time, and as time's virtue rare,
> Sober as saddest care,
> A fixed thought, an eye untaught to glance;)
> Who, blest with such high chance,
> Would at suggestion of a steep desire
> Cast himself from the spire
> Of all his happiness?

[1] In the original edition, 'most gentile and fine': a curious Italianism which must have seemed questionable or unallowable to the author's maturer taste.

And few of Jonson's many moral or gnomic passages are finer than the following:

> He that for love of goodness hateth ill
> Is more crown-worthy still
> Than he which for sin's penalty forbears;
> His heart sins, though he fears.

This metre, though very liable to the danger of monotony, is to my ear very pleasant; but that of the much admired and doubtless admirable address to Sir Robert Wroth is much less so. This poem is as good and sufficient an example of the author's ability and inability as could be found in the whole range of his elegiac or lyric works. It has excellent and evident qualities of style; energy and purity, clearness and sufficiency, simplicity and polish; but it is wanting in charm. Grace, attraction, fascination, the typical and essential properties of verse, it has not. Were Jonson to be placed among the gods of song, we should have to say of him what Æschylus says of Death—

μόνου δὲ Πειθὼ δαιμόνων ἀποστατεῖ.

The spirit of persuasive enchantment, the goddess of entrancing inspiration, kept aloof from him alone of all his peers or rivals. To men far weaker, to poets not worthy to be named with him

on the score of creative power, she gave the gift which from him was all but utterly withheld. And therefore it is that his place is not beside Shakespeare, Milton, or Shelley, but merely above Dryden, Byron, and Crabbe. The verses on Penshurst are among his best, wanting neither in grace of form nor stateliness of sound, if too surely wanting in the indefinable quality of distinction or inspiration: and the farewell to the world has a savour of George Herbert's style about it which suggests that the sacred poet must have been a sometime student of the secular. Beaumont, again, must have taken as a model of his lighter lyric style the bright and ringing verses on the proposition 'that women are but men's shadows.' The opening couplet of the striking address 'to Heaven' has been, it seems to me, misunderstood by Gifford; the meaning is not—'Can I not think of God without its making me melancholy?' but 'Can I not think of God without its being imputed or set down by others to a fit of dejection?' The few sacred poems which open the posthumous collection of his miscellaneous verse are far inferior to the best of Herrick's *Noble Numbers*; although the second of the three must probably have served the minor poet as an occasional model.

The *Celebration of Charis in ten lyric pieces* would be a graceful example of Jonson's lighter and brighter inspiration if the ten were reduced to eight. His anapæsts are actually worse than Shelley's: which hope would fain have assumed and charity would fain have believed to be impossible. 'We will take our plan from the new world of man, and our work shall be called the Pro-me-the-an'—even the hideous and excruciating cacophony of that horrible sentence is not so utterly inconceivable as verse, is not so fearfully and wonderfully immetrical as this: 'And from her arched brows such a grace sheds itself through the face.' The wheeziest of barrel-organs, the most broken-winded of bagpipes, grinds or snorts out sweeter melody than that. But the heptasyllabic verses among which this monstrous abortion rears its amorphous head are better than might have been expected; not, as Gifford says of one example, 'above all praise,' but creditable at their best and tolerable at their worst.

The miscellaneous verses collected under the pretty and appropriate name of *Underwoods* comprise more than a few of Ben Jonson's happiest and most finished examples of lyric, elegiac, and gnomic or didactic poetry; and likewise not a

little of such rigid and frigid work as makes us regret the too strenuous and habitual application of so devoted a literary craftsman to his professional round of labour. The fifth of these poems, *A Nymph's Passion*, is not only pretty and ingenious, but in the structure of its peculiar stanza may remind a modern reader of some among the many metrical experiments or inventions of a more exquisite and spontaneous lyric poet, Miss Christina Rossetti. The verses 'on a lover's dust, made sand for an hour-glass,' just come short of excellence in their fantastic way; those on his picture are something more than smooth and neat; those against jealousy are exceptionally sweet and spontaneous, again recalling the manner of the poetess just mentioned; with a touch of something like Shelley's—

> I wish the sun should shine
> On all men's fruits and flowers, as well as mine—

and also of something like George Herbert's at his best. *The Dream* is one of Jonson's most happily inspired and most happily expressed fancies; the close of it is for once not less than charming.

Of the various elegies and epistles included in

this collection it need only be said that there is much thoughtful and powerful writing in most if not in all of them, with occasional phrases or couplets of rare felicity, and here and there a noble note of enthusiasm or a masterly touch of satire. In the epistle to Sir Edward Sackvile the sketch of the 'infants of the sword' who 'give thanks by stealth' and in whispers for benefits which they are ready to disown with imprecations in public is worthy of the hand which drew Bobadil and Tucca. The sonnet to Lady Mary Wroth, good in itself, is characteristic in its preference of the orthodox Italian structure to the English or Shakespearean form. The four very powerful and remarkable elegies on a lover's quarrel and separation I should be inclined to attribute rather to Donne than to Jonson; their earnest passion, their quaint frankness, their verbal violence, their eccentric ardour of expression, at once unabashed and vehement, spontaneous and ingenious, are all of them typical characteristics of the future dean in the secular and irregular days of his hot poetic youth. The fourth and final poem of the little series is especially impressive and attractive. The turn of the sentences and the cadence of the verse are no less significant

of the authorship than is a noble couplet in the poem immediately preceding them—which would at once be recognized by a competent reader as Jonson's:

> So may the fruitful vine my temples steep,
> And fame wake for me when I yield to sleep!

The 'epistle answering to one that asked to be sealed of the tribe of Ben' is better in spirit than in execution; manful, straightforward, and upright. The 'epigram' or rather satire 'on the Court Pucelle' goes beyond even the license assumed by Pope in the virulent ferocity of its personal attack on a woman. This may be explained, or at least illustrated, by the fact that Ben Jonson's views regarding womanhood in general were radically cynical though externally chivalrous: a charge which can be brought against no other poet or dramatist of his age. He could pay more splendid compliments than any of them to this or that particular woman; the deathless epitaph on 'Sydney's sister, Pembroke's mother,' is but the crowning flower of a garland, the central jewel of a set; but no man has said coarser (I had well-nigh written, viler) things against the sex to which these exceptionally honoured patronesses belonged. This characteristic is not more significant than the

corresponding evidence given by comparison of his readiness to congratulate and commend other poets and poeticules for work not always worthy of his notice, and at the same time to indulge in such sweeping denunciation of all contemporary poetry as would not have misbecome the utterance of incarnate envy—in other words, as might have fallen from the lips of Byron. See, for one most flagrant and glaring example of what might seem the very lunacy of malignity, a passage in what Coleridge has justly called 'his splendid dedication of *The Fox*.' Here he talks of raising 'the despised head of poetry again, *and stripping her out of those rotten and base rags wherewith the times have adulterated her form*.' It is difficult to resist a temptation to emulate Ben Jonson's own utmost vehemence of language when we remember that this sentence is dated the 11th of February, 1607. Nine years before the death of Shakespeare the greatest writer of all time, the most wonderful human creature of all ages, was in the very zenith of his powers and his glory. And this was a contemporary poet's view of the condition of contemporary poetry. He was not more unlucky as a courtier and a prophet when he proclaimed the triumphant security of the English government

as twice ensured by the birth of the future King James II.

The memorial ode on the death of Sir Henry Morison has thoughtful and powerful touches in it, as well as one stanza so far above the rest that it gains by a process which would impair its effect if the poem were on the whole even a tolerably good one. The famous lines on 'the plant and flower of light' can be far better enjoyed when cut away from the context. The opening is as eccentrically execrable as the epode of the solitary strophe which redeems from all but unqualified execration a poem in which Gifford finds 'the very soul of Pindar'—whose reputation would in that case be the most inexplicable of riddles. Far purer in style and far more equable in metre is the 'ode gratulatory' to Lord Weston; and the 'epithalamion' on the marriage of that nobleman's son, though not without inequalities, crudities, and platitudes, is on the whole a fine and dignified example of ceremonial poetry. Another of the laureate's best effusions of official verse is the short ode which bids his 'gentle Muse' rouse herself to celebrate the king's birthday, 'though now our green conceits be grey,' with good wishes which have a tragic ring in the modern reader's ear. A

more unequal poem than the elegy on the Marchioness of Winchester is hardly to be found anywhere; but the finest passages are noble indeed. The elegiac poems on the famous *demi-mondaine* Venetia Stanley, who made a comparatively respectable end as Lady Digby, are equally startling and amusing in their attribution to that heroine of a character which would justify the beatification if not the canonization of its immaculate possessor. The first of these is chiefly remarkable for a singular Scotticism—'where Seraphim *take tent* of ordering all'; the fragment of the second, as an early attempt—I know not whether it be the earliest—to introduce the *terza rima* into English verse. There are one or two fine stanzas in the fourth, and the *Apotheosis* of this singular saint has a few good couplets; it contains, however, probably the most horrible and barbarous instance of inversion which the violated language can display:

> *in her hand*
> *With boughs of palm*, a crownèd victrice stand.

Such indefinable enormities as this cannot but incline us to think that this great scholar, this laurelled invader and conqueror of every field and every province of classic learning, was *intus et in*

cute an irreclaimable and incurable barbarian. And assuredly this impression will be neither removed nor modified when we come to examine his translations from Latin poetry. If the report is to be believed which attributes to Ben Jonson the avowal of an opinion that above all things he excelled in translation, it must be admitted that for once the foolish theory which represents men of genius as incapable of recognizing what is or is not their best work or their most distinguishing faculty is justified and exemplified after a fashion so memorable that the exception must be invoked to prove the rule. For a worse translator than Ben Jonson never committed a double outrage on two languages at once. I should be reluctant to quote examples of this lamentable truth, if it were not necessary to vindicate his contemporaries from such an imputation as is conveyed in the general belief that his method of translation is merely the method of his age. The fact is that it is as exceptionally abominable as his genius, when working on its own proper and original lines, is exceptionally admirable. I am no great lover of Horace, but I cannot pretend to think that the words

Translations.

Si torrere jecur quæris idoneum

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are adequately rendered by the words

> If a fit liver thou dost seek to toast.

Fate and fire did a double injury, if not a double injustice, to Ben Jonson, when his commentary on Horace's *Art of Poetry* was consumed and his translation of the text preserved. The commentary in which Donne was represented under the name of Criticus must have been one of the most interesting and valuable of Jonson's prose works: the translation is one of those miracles of incompetence, incongruity, and insensibility, which must be seen to be believed. It may be admitted that there is a very happy instance of exact and pointed rendering from the ninth and tenth lines of the original in the eleventh and twelfth lines of the translation.

> Pictoribus atque poetis
> Quidlibet audendi semper fuit æqua potestas.
> Scimus.

Pope himself could not have rendered this well-known passage more neatly, more smoothly, more perfectly and more happily than thus—

> But equal power to painter and to poet
> Of daring all hath still been given: we know it.

And in the seventh line following we come upon this indescribable horror—an abomination of which

Abraham Fraunce or Gabriel Harvey would by charitable readers have been considered incapable: as perhaps indeed they were.

> A scarlet piece or two stitch'd in; when or
> Diana's grove or altar, *with the bor-*
> *D'ring* circles of swift waters, &c, &c.

'The bellman writes better verses,' said Mr. Osbaldistone, when he threw poor Frank's away. Walt Whitman writes no worse, a modern critic will reflect on reading these.

The version of one of Martial's gracefullest epigrams flows more pleasantly than usual till it ends with a horrible jolt, thus:—

> He that but living half his days dies such,
> Makes his life longer than 'twas given him, much.

And Echo answers—Much! Gifford, however, waxes ecstatic over these eight lines. 'It is the most beautiful of all the versions of this elegant poem,' and, if we may believe him, 'clearly and fully expresses the whole of its meaning.' Witness the second line—

> Thou worthy in eternal flower to fare.

That is no more English than it is Latin—no more accurate than it is intelligible. The original is as simple as it is lovely:—

> Liber in æternâ vivere digne rosâ.

It would be worse than superfluous to look among his other versions from Horace for further evidence of Ben Jonson's incomparable incompetence as a translator. But as this has been hitherto very insufficiently insisted on,—his reputation as a poet and a scholar standing apparently between the evidence of this fact and the recognition of it,—I will give one crowning example from *The Poetaster*. This is what Virgil is represented as reading to Augustus—and Augustus as hearing without a shriek of agony and horror.

> Meanwhile the skies 'gan thunder, and in tail[1]
> Of that fell pouring storms of sleet and hail.

'In tail of that'! *Proh Deûm atque hominum fidem!* And it is Virgil—Virgil, of all men and all poets—to whom his traducer has the assurance to attribute this inexpressible atrocity of outrage!

The case of Ben Jonson is the great standing example of a truth which should never be forgotten or overlooked; that no amount of learning, of labour, or of culture will supply the place of natural taste and native judgment—will avail in any slightest degree to confer the critical faculty upon a man to whom nature has denied it. Just judg-

[1] Compare *Æn.* iv. 160.

ment of others, just judgment of himself, was all but impossible to this great writer, this consummate and indefatigable scholar, this generous and enthusiastic friend. The noble infirmity of excess in benevolence is indisputably no less obvious in three great writers of our own century; great, each of them, like Ben Jonson, in prose as well as in verse: one of them greater than he, one of them equal, and one of them hardly to be accounted equal with him. Victor Hugo, Walter Savage Landor, and Théophile Gautier, were doubtless as exuberant in generosity—the English poet was perhaps as indiscriminate in enthusiasm of patronage or of sympathy—as even the promiscuous panegyrist of Shakespeare, of Fletcher, of Chapman, of Drayton, of Browne, of Brome, and of May; and moreover of one Stephens, of one Rutter, of one Wright, of one Warre, and of one Filmer. Of these last five names, that of the worthy Master Joseph Rutter—Ben's 'dear son, and right learned friend'—is the only one which signifies to me the existence of an author not utterly unknown. His spiritual father or theatrical sponsor is most copious and most cordial in his commendations of the good man's pastoral drama; he has not mentioned its one crowning excellence– the quality for which, having

tried it every night for upwards of six weeks running, I can confidently and conscientiously recommend it. Chloral is not only more dangerous but very much less certain as a soporific: the sleeplessness which could resist the influence of Mr. Rutter's verse can be curable only by dissolution; the eyes which can keep open through the perusal of six consecutive pages must never hope to find rest but in the grave.

The many ceremonial or occasional poems addressed to friends and patrons of various ranks and characters, from the king and queen to a Mr. Burges and a Mr. Squib, are of equally various interest, now graver and now lighter, to a careful student of Ben Jonson as a poet and a man. Nor, when due account is taken of the time and its conventional habits of speech, does it seem to me that any of them can be justly charged with servility or flattery, or, as the writer might have said, with 'assentation.' But these effusions or improvisations are of no more serious importance than the exquisitely neat and terse composition of the 'Leges Convivales,' or the admirable good sense and industry, the admirable perspicacity and perspicuity, which will be recognized no less in the Latin than in the English part of his

Leges Convivales

English Grammar. It is interesting to observe an anticipation of Landor's principle with respect to questions of orthography, in the preference given to the Latin form of spelling for words of Latin derivation, while admitting that this increase of accuracy would bring the written word no nearer to the sound uttered in speaking. The passage is worth transcription as an example of delicately scrupulous accuracy and subtly conscientious refinement in explanation.

English Grammar.

Alii hæc haud inconsultò scribunt *abil*, *stabil*, *fabul*; tanquam a fontibus *habilis*, *stabilis*, *fabula*: veriùs, sed nequicquam proficiunt Nam consideratiùs auscultanti nec *i* nec *u* est, sed tinnitus quidam, *vocalis* naturam habens, quæ naturaliter his liquidis inest.

A point on which I am sorry to rest uncertain whether Landor would have felt as much sympathy with Jonson's view as I feel myself is the regret expressed by the elder poet for the loss of the Saxon characters that distinguished the two different sounds now both alike expressed, and expressed with equal inaccuracy, by the two letters *th*. 'And in this,' says Jonson—as it seems to me, most reasonably, 'consists the greatest difficulty of our alphabet and true writing.'

The text of the grammar, both Latin and

English, requires careful revision and correction; but indeed as much must be said of the text of Jonson's works in general. Gifford did very much for it, but he left not a little to be done. And the arrangement adopted in Colonel Cunningham's beautiful and serviceable edition of 1875 is the most extraordinary—at least, I hope and believe so—on record. All the misreadings of the edition of 1816 are retained in the text, where they stand not merely uncorrected but unremarked; so that the bewildered student must refer at random, on the even chance of disappointment, to an appendix in which he may find them irregularly registered, with some occasional comment on the previous editor's negligence and caprice: a method, to put it as mildly as possible, somewhat provocative of strong language on the part of a studious and belated reader—language for which it cannot rationally be imagined that it is he who will be registered by the recording angel as culpably responsible. What is wanted in the case of so great an English classic is of course nothing less than this: a careful and complete edition of all his extant writings, with all the various readings of the various editions published during his lifetime. This is the very least that should be exacted; and this

is less than has yet been supplied. Edition after edition of Shakespeare is put forth under the auspices of scholars or of dunces without a full and plain enumeration of the exact differences of text —the corrections, suppressions, alterations, and modifications—which distinguish the text of the quartos from the too frequently garbled and mangled, the sometimes transfigured and glorified text of the folio. And consequently not one devoted student in a thousand has a chance of knowing what he has a right to know of the gradations and variations in expression, the development and the self-discipline in display, of the most transcendent intelligence that ever illuminated humanity. And in the case of Shakespeare's most loyal comrade and panegyrist—though sometimes, it may be, his rather captious rival and critic—the neglect of his professed devotees and editorial interpreters has been scarcely less scandalous and altogether as incomprehensible. In every edition which makes any pretence to completeness, or to satisfaction of a serious student's indispensable requisites and inevitable demands, the first text of *Every Man in his Humour* should of course be given in full. Snatches and scraps of it are given in the notes to the edition of 1816; the first act is

reprinted—the first act alone—in the appendix to the first volume of the edition of 1875. What would be said by Hellenists or Latinists if such contemptuous indolence, such insolence of neglect, were displayed by the editor of a Greek or Latin poet—assuming that his edition had been meant for other than fourth-form or fifth-form service? Compare the devotion of their very best editors to Shakespeare and to Jonson with the devotion of Mr. Ellis to Catullus and Mr. Munro to Lucretius. It is a shame that Englishmen should not be forthcoming who would think it worth while to expend as much labour, and would be competent to bring that labour to as good an end, in the service of their own immortal countrymen, as is expended and as is attained by classical scholars in the service of alien and not more adorable gods. And on one point—a point indeed of more significance than importance—the capricious impertinence of such editors as do condescend to undertake any part of such a task is so inexplicable except on one supposition that we are tempted to embrace, or at least to accept, the assumption that the editor (for instance) of Ben Jonson considers the author of *The Silent Woman*, *Bartholomew Fair*, and certain metrical emetics classified under the head

of *Epigrams*, as a writer fit to be placed in the hands of schoolgirls. And even then it is difficult to imagine why we come upon certain rows of asterisks in the record of his conversations with Drummond, and in the anonymous interlude written —as Gifford supposes —'for the christening of a son of the Earl of Newcastle, to whom the king or the prince stood godfather.' Even if Jonson had taken—as on such an occasion it would be strange if he had taken—the utmost license of his friends Aristophanes and Rabelais, this would be no reason for treating the reader like a schoolboy or a Dauphin. What a man of genius has written for a public occasion is public property thenceforward and for ever: and the pretence of a man like Gifford to draw the line and determine the limit of publicity is inexpressibly preposterous.

The little interlude, however broad and even coarse in its realistic pleasantry, is a quaint and spirited piece of work; but there are other matters in Colonel Cunningham's appendix which have no right, demonstrable or imaginable, to the place they occupy. It is incredible, it is inconceivable, that Jonson should ever have written such a line as this by way of a Latin verse:

Macte: tuo scriptores lectoresque labore (!!!)

'Les chassepots partiraient d'eux-mêmes'—birch would make itself into spontaneous rods for the schoolboy who could perpetrate so horrible an atrocity. The repulsive and ridiculous rubbish which has ignorantly and absurdly been taken for 'a fragment of one of the lost quaternions of *Eupheme*' is part, I am sorry to say, of an elegy by Francis Beaumont on one Lady Markham. It is an intolerable scandal that the public should be content to endure such an outrage as the intrusion of another man's abominable absurdities into the text of such a writer as Ben Jonson. This effusion of his young friend's, which must surely have been meant as a joke—and a very bad, not to say a very brutal one, is probably the most hideous nonsense ever written on the desecrated subject of death and decay. A smaller but a serious example of negligence and incompetence is patent in the text of the ten lines contributed by Jonson to the *Annalia Dubrensia*—that most pleasant and curious athletic anthology, the reissue of which is one of the wellnigh countless obligations conferred on students of the period by the devoted industry, energy, and ability of Dr. Grosart. He, of course, could not fail to see that the first of these lines was corrupt. 'I cannot bring my *Muse* to dropp

Vies' is obviously neither sense nor metre. It is rather with diffidence than with confidence that I would suggest the reading *double* in place of the palpably corrupt word *drop*: but from Gifford's explanation of the gambling term *vie* I should infer that this reading, which certainly rectifies the metre, might also restore the sense. Another obvious error is to be noted in the doggrel lines on Lady Ogle, which afford a curious and compact example of Ben Jonson's very worst vices of style and metre. Still, as Ben was not in the habit of writing flat nonsense, we ought evidently to read 'in the *sight* of Angels,' not, as absurdly printed in the edition of 1875 (ix. 326), 'in the Light'; especially as the next verse ends with that word. The commendatory verses on *Cynthia's Revenge* which reappear at page 346 of the same volume had appeared on page 332 of the volume immediately preceding. Such editorial derelictions and delinquencies are enough to inoculate the most patient reader's humour with the acerbity of Gifford's or Carlyle's. Again, this appendix gives only one or two fragments of the famous additional scenes to *The Spanish Tragedy*, while the finest and most important passages are omitted and ignored. For one thing, however, we have

reason to be grateful to the compiler who has inserted for the first time among Ben Jonson's works the fine and flowing stanzas described by their author as an allegoric ode. This poem, which in form is Horatian, has no single stanza so beautiful or so noble as the famous third strophe of the Pindaric ode to Sir Lucius Cary on the death of Sir Henry Morison; but its general superiority in purity of style and fluidity of metre is as remarkable as the choice and use of proper names with such a dexterous felicity as to emulate while it recalls the majestic and magnificent instincts of Marlowe and of Milton.

If the fame of Ben Jonson were in any degree dependent on his minor or miscellaneous works in verse, it would be difficult to assign him a place above the third or fourth rank of writers belonging to the age of Shakespeare. His station in the first class of such writers, and therefore in the front rank of English authors, is secured mainly by the excellence of his four masterpieces in comedy; *The Fox* and *The Alchemist*, *The Staple of News* and *Every Man in his Humour*: but a single leaf of his *Discoveries* is worth all his lyrics, tragedies, elegies, and epigrams together. That golden little book of noble thoughts and subtle observations is

the one only province of his vast and varied empire which yet remains for us to examine; and in none other will there be found more ample and more memorable evidence how truly great a man demands our homage—'on this side idolatry'—for the imperishable memory of Ben Jonson.

III

DISCOVERIES

III

DISCOVERIES

THAT chance is the ruler of the world I should be sorry to believe and reluctant to affirm; but it would be difficult for any competent and careful student to maintain that chance is not the ruler of the world of letters. Gray's odes are still, I suppose, familiar to thousands who know nothing of Donne's *Anniversaries*; and Bacon's Essays are conventionally if not actually familiar to thousands who know nothing of Ben Jonson's *Discoveries*. And yet it is certain that in fervour of inspiration, in depth and force and glow of thought and emotion and expression, Donne's verses are as far above Gray's as Jonson's notes or observations on men and morals, on principles and on facts, are superior to Bacon's in truth of insight, in breadth of view, in vigour of reflection and in concision of eloquence. The dry curt style of the statesman, docked and trimmed into sentences that are

regularly snapped off or snipped down at the close of each deliverance, is as alien and as far from the fresh and vigorous spontaneity of the poet's as is the trimming and hedging morality of the essay on 'simulation and dissimulation' from the spirit and instinct of the man who 'of all things loved to be called honest.' But indeed, from the ethical point of view which looks merely or mainly to character, the comparison is little less than an insult to the Laureate; and from the purely intelligent or æsthetic point of view I should be disposed to say, or at least inclined to think, that the comparison would be hardly less unduly complimentary to the Chancellor.

For at the very opening of these *Explorata, or Discoveries*, we find ourselves in so high and so pure an atmosphere of feeling and of thought that we cannot but recognize and rejoice in the presence and the influence of one of the noblest, manliest, most honest and most helpful natures that ever dignified and glorified a powerful intelligence and an admirable genius. In the very first note, the condensed or concentrated quintessence of a Baconian essay on Fortune, we find these among other lofty and weighty words: 'Heaven prepares good men with crosses; but no ill can

happen to a good man.' 'That which happens to any man, may to every man. But it is in his reason what he accounts it and will make it.'

There is perhaps in the structure of this sentence something too much of the Latinist—too strong a flavour of the style of Tacitus in its elaborate if not laborious terseness of expression. But the following could hardly be bettered.

No man is so foolish but may give another good counsel sometimes; and no man is so wise but may easily err, if he will take no other's counsel but his own. But very few men are wise by their own counsel, or learned by their own teaching. For he that was only taught by himself had a fool to his master.

The mind's ear may find or fancy a silvery ring of serene good sense in the note of that reflection; but the ring of what follows is pure gold.

There is a necessity all men should love their country; he that professeth the contrary may be delighted with his words, but his heart is [not] there.

The magnificent expansion or paraphrase of this noble thought in the fourth scene of Landor's magnificent tragedy of *Count Julian* should be familiar to all capable students of English poetry at its purest and proudest height of sublime contemplation. That probably or rather undoubtedly

unconscious echo of the sentiment of an older poet and patriot has in it the prolonged reverberation and repercussion of music which we hear in the echoes of thunder or a breaking sea.

Again, how happy in the bitterness of its truth is the next remark: 'Natures that are hardened to evil you shall sooner break than make straight: they are like poles that are crooked and dry: there is no attempting them.' And how grand is this:

> I cannot think nature is so spent and decayed that she can bring forth nothing worth her former years. She is always the same, like herself; and when she collects her strength,[1] is abler still. *Men are decayed, and studies: she is not.*

Jonson never wrote a finer verse than that; and very probably he never observed that it was a verse.

The next note is one of special interest to all students of the great writer who has so often been described as a blind worshipper and a servile disciple of classical antiquity.

'I know nothing can conduce more to letters,' says the too obsequious observer of Tacitus and of Cicero in

[1] As in the production of Shakespeare—if his good friend Ben had but known it.

the composition of his Roman tragedies, 'than to examine the writings of the ancients, and not to rest on their sole authority, or take all upon trust from them; provided the plagues of judging and pronouncing against them be away; such as are envy, bitterness, precipitation, impudence, and scurril scoffing. For, to all the observations of the ancients, we have our own experience; which if we will use and apply, we have better means to pronounce. It is true they opened the gates, and made the way, that went before us; but as guides, not commanders: *Non domini nostri sed duces fuere.* Truth lies open to all; it is no man's several. *Patet omnibus veritas: nondum est occupata. Multum ex illâ etiam futuris relictum est.*'[1]

Time and space would fail me to transcribe all that is worth transcription, to comment on everything that deserves commentary, in this treasure-house of art and wisdom, eloquence and good sense. But the following extract could be passed over by no eye but a mole's or a bat's.

I do not desire to be equal with those that went before; but to have my reason examined with theirs, and so much faith to be given them, or me, as those shall evict [in modern English—if the text is not corrupt—'as the comparison or confrontation of theirs with mine shall elicit']. I am neither author nor fautor of any sect. I will have no man addict himself to me; but if I have

[1] The scandalously neglected text reads *relicta.* Perhaps we should read 'Multa—relicta sunt.'

anything right, defend it as Truth's, not mine, save as it conduceth to a common good. It profits not me to have any man fence or fight for me, to flourish, or take my side. Stand for Truth, and 'tis enough.

The haughty vindication of 'arts that respect the mind' as 'nobler than those that serve the body, though we less can be without them' (the latter), is at once amusingly and admirably Jonsonian. Admitting the ignoble fact that without such 'arts' as 'tillage, spinning, weaving, building, &c.,' 'we could scarce sustain life a day,' a proposition which it certainly would seem difficult to dispute, he proceeds in the loftiest tone of professional philosophy: 'But these were the works of every hand; the other of the brain only, and those the most generous and exalted wits and spirits, that cannot rest or acquiesce. The mind of man is still fed with labour: *opere pascitur*.'

This conscientious and self-conscious pride of intellect finds even a nobler and more memorable expression in the admirable words which instruct or which remind us of the truth that 'it is as great a spite to be praised in the wrong place, and by the wrong person, as can be done to a noble nature.' A sentence worthy to be set beside the fittest motto for all loyal men—'Æqua laus est a laudatis

laudari et ab improbis improbari.' Which it would be well that every man worthy to apply it should lay to heart, and act and bear himself accordingly.

It is to be wished that the dramatist and humourist had always or had usually borne in mind the following excellent definition or reflection of the aphoristic philosopher or student: 'A tedious person is one a man would leap a steeple from, gallop down any steep hill to avoid him; forsake his meat, sleep, nature itself, with all her benefits, to shun him.' What then shall we say of the courtiers in *Cynthia's Revels* and the vapourers in *Bartholomew Fair*?

The following is somewhat especially suggestive of a present political application; and would find its appropriate setting in a modern version of the *Irish Masque.*

> He is a narrow-minded man that affects a triumph in any glorious study; but to triumph in a lie, and a lie themselves have forged, is frontless. Folly often goes beyond her bounds; but Impudence knows none.

From the forty-third to the forty-eighth entry inclusive these disconnected notes should be read as a short continuous essay on envy and calumny.

For weight, point, and vigour, it would hardly be possible to overpraise it.

In the admirable note on such 'foolish lovers' as 'wish the same to their friends as their enemies would,' merely that they might have occasion to display the constancy of their regard, there is a palpable and preposterous misprint, which reduces to nonsense a remarkably fine passage: 'They make a causeway to their courtesy by injury; as if it were not honester to do nothing than to seek a way to do good by a mischief.' For the obviously right word 'courtesy' the unspeakable editors read 'country'; which let him explain who can.

The two notes on injuries and benefits are observable for their wholesome admixture of common sense with magnanimity.

> Injuries do not extinguish courtesies: they only suffer them not to appear fair. For a man that doth me an injury after a courtesy takes not away that courtesy, but defaces it: as he that writes other verses upon my verses takes not away the first letters, but hides them.

Surely no sentence more high-minded and generous than that was ever written: nor one more sensible and dignified than this:—

> The doing of courtesies aright is the mixing of the

respects for his own sake and for mine. He that doeth them merely for his own sake is like one that feeds his cattle to sell them: he hath his horse well drest for Smithfield.

The following touch of mental autobiography is not less interesting than curious. Had Shakespeare but left us the like!

I myself could in my youth have repeated all that ever I had made, and so continued till I was past forty: since, it is much decayed in me. Yet I can repeat whole books that I have read, and poems of some selected friends, which I have liked to charge my memory with. It was wont to be faithful to me; but, shaken with age now, and sloth, which weakens the strongest abilities, it may perform somewhat, but cannot promise much. By exercise it is to be made better, and serviceable. Whatsoever I pawned with it while I was young, and a boy, it offers me readily, and without stops: but what I trust to it now, or have done of later years, it lays up more negligently, and oftentimes loses; so that I receive mine own (though frequently called for) as if it were new and borrowed. Nor do I always find presently from it what I seek: but while I am doing another thing, that I laboured for will come; and what I sought with trouble will offer itself when I am quiet. Now in some men [was Shakespeare, we must ask ourselves, one of these?] I have found it as happy as nature, who, whatsoever they read or pen, they can say without book presently; as if they did then write in their mind. And it is more a

wonder in such as have a swift style, for their memories are commonly slowest; such as torture their writings, and go into council for every word, must needs fix somewhat, and make it their own at last, though but through their own vexation.

I cannot but imagine that Jonson must have witnessed this wonder in the crowning case of Shakespeare; the swiftness of whose 'style' or composition was matter of general note.

The anti-Gallican or anti-democratic view of politics can never be more vividly or happily presented than in these brilliant and incisive words:—

Suffrages in Parliament are numbered, nôt weighed: nor can it be otherwise in those public councils, *where nothing is so unequal as the equality*: for there, how odd soever men's brains or wisdoms are, their power is always even and the same.

But the most cordial hater or scorner of parliaments, whether from the Carlylesque or the Bonapartist point of vantage, must allow that the truth expressed in the two first sentences following is more certain and more precious than the doctrine just cited.

Truth is man's proper good, and the only immortal thing was given to our mortality to use. No good

Christian or ethnic, if he be honest, can miss it: no statesman or patriot should. For without truth all the actions of mankind are craft, malice, or what you will rather than wisdom. Homer says he hates him worse than hell-mouth that utters one thing with his tongue and keeps another in his breast. Which high expression was grounded on divine reason: for a lying mouth is a stinking pit, and murders with the contagion it venteth. Besides, nothing is lasting that is feigned; it will have another face than it had ere long. As Euripides saith, 'No lie ever grows old.'

It would be well if this were so: but the inveterate reputation of Euripides as a dramatic poet is hardly reconcilable with the truth of his glibly optimistic assumption. Nor, had that fluent and facile dealer in flaccid verse and sentimental sophistry spoken truth for once in this instance, should we have had occasion to wonder at the admiration expressed for him by the most subtle and sincere, the most profound and piercing intelligence of our time; nor could that sense of reverential amazement have found spontaneous expression in the following couplet of Hudibrastic doggrel:—

> That the huckster of pathos, whose gift was insipid ease,
> Finds favour with Browning, must puzzle Euripides.

But Jonson himself, it seems to me, was far

less trustworthy as a critic of poetry than as a judge on ethics or a student of character. The tone of supercilious goodwill and friendly condonation which distinguishes his famous note on Shakespeare is unmistakable except by the most wilful perversity of prepossession. His noble metrical tribute to Shakespeare's memory must of course be taken into account when we are disposed to think too hardly of this honest if egotistic eccentricity of error: but it would be foolish to suppose that the most eloquent cordiality of a ceremonial poem could express more of one man's real and critical estimate of another than a deliberate reflection of later date. And it needs the utmost possible exertion of charity, the most generous exercise of justice, to forgive the final phrase of preposterous patronage and considerate condescension—'There was ever more in him to be praised than to be pardoned.' The candid author of *Sejanus* could on the whole afford to admit so much with respect to the popular author of *Hamlet*.

In the subsequent essay, divided under ten several heads into ten several notes, on 'the difference of wits,' or the diversity of accomplishments and understandings, there is much worth

study for its soundness of judgment, its accuracy of definition, and its felicity of expression It would be well if educational and professional formalists would bear in mind the truth that 'there is no doctrine will do good, where nature is wanting'; and nothing could be neater, terser, or truer than the definition of those characters 'that are forward and bold; and these will do every little thing easily; I mean, that is hard by and next them, which they will utter unretarded without any shamefastness. These never perform much, but quickly. They are what they are, on the sudden; they show presently, like grain that, scattered on the top of the ground, shoots up, but takes no root; has a yellow blade, but the ear empty. They are wits of good promise at first, but there is an ingenistitium—a wit-stand: they stand still at sixteen, they get no higher.'

As well worth remark and recollection are the succeeding notes on 'others, that labour only to ostentation; and are ever more busy about the colours and surface of a work than in the matter and foundation: for that is hid, the other is seen'; and on those whose style of composition is purposely 'rough and broken—and if it would come gently, they trouble it of purpose. They would

not have it run without rubs: as if that style were more strong and manly that struck the ear with a kind of unevenness. These men err not by chance, but knowingly and willingly; they are like men that affect a fashion by themselves, have some singularity in a ruff, cloak, or hat-band; or their beards specially cut to provoke beholders, and set a mark upon themselves. They would be reprehended, while they are looked on. And this vice, one, that is in authority with the rest, loving, delivers over to them to be imitated; so that oft-times the faults which he fell into, the others seek for: this is the danger, when vice becomes a precedent.'

It is difficult to imagine that Jonson was not here thinking of the great writer whom 'he esteemed the first poet in the world in some things,' but upon whom he passed the too sweeping though too plausible sentence 'that Donne, for not being understood, would perish.' Nor can we suppose that he was not alluding to Daniel—the inoffensive object of his implacable satire—when he laid a 'chastising hand' on 'others that have no composition at all, but a kind of tuning and rhyming fall, in what they write. It runs and slides, and only makes a sound. Women's poets

they are called, as you have women's tailors.—You may sound these wits and find the depth of them with your middle finger. They are cream-bowl- (or but puddle-) deep.'

An amusing anticipation of the peculiar genius for elaborate mendacity which distinguishes and connects the names of De Quincey and Mérimée will be found in Jonson's words of stern and indignant censure on 'some who, after they have got authority, or, which is less, opinion, by their writings, to have read much, dare presently to feign whole books and authors, and lie safely. For what never was will not easily be found; not by the most curious.' Certainly it was not by the innocent readers whose research into the original authorities for the history of the revolt of the Tartars, or whose interest in the original text of Clara Gazul's plays and the Illyrian ballads of *La Guzla*, must have given such keen delight to those two frontless and matchless charlatans of genius.

The keen and scornful intelligence of Jonson finds no less admirable expression in the two succeeding notes; of which the first sets a brand on such cunning plagiarists as protest against all reading, and so 'think to divert the sagacity of

their readers from themselves, and cool the scent of their own fox-like thefts;' but, as he proceeds to observe, 'the obstinate contemners of all helps and arts are in a 'wretcheder' case than even these. His description of such pretenders is too lifelike, and too vivid in its perennial veracity, to be overlooked; 'such as presuming on their own naturals (which perhaps are excellent) dare deride all diligence, and seem to mock at the terms when they understand not the things; thinking that way to get off wittily with their ignorance. These are imitated often by such as are their peers in negligence, though they cannot be in nature; and they utter all they can think with a kind of violence and indisposition; unexamined, without relation to person, place, or any fitness else; and the more wilful and stubborn they are in it, the more learned they are esteemed of the multitude, through their excellent vice of judgment; who think those things the stronger, that have no art; as if to break were better than to open; or to rend asunder, gentler than to loose.'

In the tenth section or subdivision of this irregular and desultory but incisive and masterly essay we find a singular combination of critical insight with personal prejudice—of general truth

with particular error. But the better part is excellent alike in reflection and in expression.

It cannot but come to pass that these men who commonly seek to do more than enough may sometimes happen on something that is good and great; but very seldom: and when it comes it doth not recompense the rest of their ill.—The true artificer will not run away from nature, as he were afraid of her; or depart from life, and the likeness of truth; but speak to the capacity of his hearers.

The rest of the note is valuable as a studious and elaborate expression of Jonson's theory or ideal of dramatic poetry, couched in apt and eloquent phrases of thoughtful and balanced rhetoric; regrettable only for the insulting reference to the first work of a yet greater poet than himself, to whose 'mighty line' he had paid immortal homage in an earlier and a better mood of judgment.

But however prone he may be to error or perversity in particular instances or in personal examples, he is constantly and nobly right in his axiomatic reflections and his general observations. The following passage seems to me a magnificent illustration of this truth.

I know no disease of the soul but ignorance; not of

the arts and sciences, but of itself: yet relating to those it is a pernicious evil, the darkener of man's life, the disturber of his reason, and the common confounder of truth; with which a man goes groping in the dark, no otherwise than if he were blind. Great understandings are most racked and troubled with it; nay, sometimes they will rather choose to die than not to know the things they study for.[1] Think then what an evil it is, and what [a] good the contrary.

The ensuing note on knowledge has less depth of direct insight, less force of practical reason; but the definition which follows is singularly eloquent and refined, however scholastic and irrational in its casuistic and rhetorical subtlety.

Knowledge is the action of the soul, and is perfect without the senses,[2] as having the seeds of all science and virtue in itself; but not without the service of the senses; by these organs the soul works: she is a perpetual agent, prompt and subtle; but often flexible and erring, entangling herself like a silkworm: but her reason is a weapon with two edges, and cuts through.

I am inclined to suspect that we may discern in

[1] No modern reader of these lofty words can fail to call to mind the sublime pathos and the historic interes of Mr. Browning's glorious poem, *A Grammarian's Funeral.*

[2] It is a pity we are not told how; for to the ordinary intelligence of reasoning mankind it would appear that 'without the senses' not only could knowledge not be perfect, but it could not even exist in the most inchoate or embryonic phase of being.

the next note another fragment of autobiography. For it may be doubted whether 'the boon Delphic god,' so admirably described by his faithful acolyte Marmion as presiding in the form of a human Laureate over the Bacchanalian oracle of Apollo, can ever have been able to say with equal truth of another than himself,

I have known a man vehement on both sides, that knew no mean either to intermit his studies or call upon them again. When he hath set himself to writing, he would join night to day, press upon himself without release, not minding it, till he fainted; and when he got off, resolve himself into all sports and looseness again, that it was almost a despair to draw him to his book; but once got to it, he grew stronger and more earnest by the ease. His whole powers were renewed: he would work out of himself what he desired; but with such excess, as his study could not be ruled: he knew not how to dispose his own abilities or husband them, he was of that immoderate power against himself. Nor was he only a strong but an absolute speaker and writer; but his subtlety did not show itself; his judgment thought that a vice: for the ambush hurts more that is hid. He never forced his language, nor went out of the highway of speaking, but for some great necessity, or apparent profit: for he denied figures to be invented for ornament, but for aid: and still thought it an extreme madness to bend or wrest that which ought to be right.

If any reader should think such a mixture of critical self-examination and complacent self-glorification impossible to any man of indisputable genius and of general good sense, that reader is not yet 'sealed of the tribe of Ben'; he has not arrived at a due appreciation of the writer's general strength and particular weakness as a critic and a workman, an artist and a thinker.

The note on famous orators is remarkable for its keen discrimination and appreciation of various talents; and the subsequent analysis or definition of Bacon's great gifts as a speaker, which has been often enough quoted to dispense with any fresh citation, is only less fine than the magnificent tribute paid a little further on to the same great man in his days of adversity. It may well be questioned whether there exists a finer example of English prose than the latter famous passage; where sublimity is resolved into pathos, and pathos dilates into sublimity. His idealism of monarchy, however irrational it may seem to us, has a finer side to it than belongs to the blind superstition of such a royalist as Fletcher. Witness this striking and touching interpretation of an old metaphor: 'Why are prayers said with Orpheus to be the daughters of Jupiter, but that princes are thereby

admonished that the petitions of the wretched ought to have more weight with them than the laws themselves?' And the following note gives a better and a kindlier impression of King James I. than anything else—as far as I know—recorded of that singular sovereign.

It was a great accumulation to his majesty's deserved praise, that men might openly visit and pity those whom his greatest prisons had at any time received, or his laws condemned.

The note on 'the attribute of a prince' is rather Baconian than Jonsonian in its cult of 'prudence' as 'his chief art and safety'; but the peculiar and practical humour of Jonson's observant and studious satire is well exemplified in his strictures on such theological controversialists as 'are like swaggerers in a tavern, that catch that which stands next them, the candlesticks or pots—turn everything into a weapon: ofttimes they fight blindfold, and both beat the air. The one milks a he-goat, the other holds under a sieve. Their arguments are as fluxive as liquor spilt upon a table, which with your finger you may drain as you will.' But the remarks on 'untimely boasting' are especially worth transcription, both for their own real excellence and for the unconscious but inexpressible

drollery of such an utterance from the 'capacious mouth' which had so often and so loudly set forth under divers names and figures the claims and the merits of Ben Jonson.

> Men that talk of their own benefits are not believed to talk of them because they have done them, but to have done them because they might talk of them. That which had been great if another had reported it of them vanisheth and is nothing if he that did it speak of it. For men when they cannot destroy the deed, will yet be glad to take advantage of the boasting and lessen it.

We may hope that these wise and weighty words were not written without some regretful if not repentant reminiscence of sundry occasions on which this rule of conduct had been grossly and grievously transgressed by the writer, to his own inevitable damage and discomfiture.

The note on flattery and flatterers is as exalted in its austerity as trenchant in its scorn. And the following remark 'on human life' is the condensed or distilled essence of a noble satire or a powerful essay.

> I have considered our whole life is like a play, wherein every man, forgetful of himself, is in travail with expression of another. Nay, we so insist in imitating others, as we cannot (when it is necessary) return to ourselves;

like children that imitate the vices of stammerers so long, till at last they become such; and make the habit to another nature, as it is never forgotten.

There is a noble enthusiasm for goodness in the phrase which avers that 'good men are the stars, the planets of the ages wherein they live, and illustrate the times.' After an enumeration of scriptural instances, the poet adds this commentary: 'These, sensual men thought mad, because they would not be partakers or practisers of their madness. But they, placed high on the top of all virtue, looked down on the stage of the world, and contemned the play of fortune. For though the most be players, some must be spectators.'

And there is a fine touch of grave and bitter humour in the discovery 'that a feigned familiarity in great ones is a note of certain usurpation on the less. For great and popular men feign themselves to be servants to others, to make those slaves to them. So the fisher provides bait for the trout, roach, dace, &c., that they may be food to him.'

But finer by far and far more memorable than this is the following commentary on the fact that the emperor whose 'voice was worthier a headsman than a head, when he wished the people of Rome

had but one neck,' 'found (when he fell) they had many hands.'

> A tyrant, how great and mighty soever he may seem to cowards and sluggards, is but one creature, one animal.

That sentence is worthy of Landor; and those who would reproach Ben Jonson with the extravagance of his monarchical doctrines or theories must admit that such royalism as is compatible with undisguised approval of regicide or tyrannicide might not irrationally be condoned by the sternest and most rigid of republicans.

The next eight notes or entries deal in a somewhat desultory fashion with the subject of government; and display, as might be expected, a very singular combination or confusion of obsolete sophistry and superstition with rational and liberal intelligence. He attacks Machiavelli repeatedly, but there is a distinct streak of what is usually understood as Machiavellism in the remark, for example, that when a prince governs his people 'so as they have still need of his administration (for that is his art) he shall ever make and hold them faithful.' In answer to Machiavelli's principle of cruelty by proxy, he pleads with great and simple force of eloquence against all principles of

cruelty whatever. Many noble passages might be quoted from this pleading; but only a few can here be selected from the third and fourth, the sixth and seventh, of the entries above mentioned; which may on the whole be considered, when all due reservation is made with regard to the monarchical principle or superstition, as composing altogether a concise and masterly essay on the art and the principles of wise and righteous government.

Many punishments sometimes and in some cases as much discredit a prince as many funerals a physician. The state of things is secured by clemency: severity represseth a few, but irritates more. The lopping of trees makes the boughs shoot out thicker; and the taking away of some kind of enemies increaseth the number. It is then most gracious in a prince to pardon, when many about him would make him cruel; to think then how much he can save, when others tell him how much he can destroy; not to consider what the impotence of others hath demolished, but what his own greatness can sustain. These are a prince's virtues: and they that give him other counsels are but the hangman's factors.

But princes, by hearkening to cruel counsels, become in time obnoxious to the authors, their flatterers and ministers; and are brought to that, that when they would they dare not change them; they must go on, and defend cruelty with cruelty; they cannot alter the habit. It is

then grown necessary they must be as ill as those have made them: and in the end they will grow more hateful to themselves than to their subjects. Whereas, on the contrary, the merciful prince is safe in love, not in fear. He needs no emissaries, spies, intelligencers, to entrap true subjects. He fears no libels, no treasons. His people speak what they think, and talk openly what they do in secret. They have nothing in their breasts that they need a cipher for. He is guarded with his own benefits.

There is nothing with some princes sacred above their majesty; or profane, but what violates their sceptres. But a prince with such a council [qu. counsel?] is like the god Terminus of stone, his own landmark; or (as it is in the fable) a crowned lion. . . . No men hate an evil prince more than they that helped to make him such. And none more boastingly weep his ruin than they that procured and practised it. The same path leads to ruin which did to rule, when men profess a license in government. A good king is a public servant.

A prince without letters is a pilot without eyes. All his government is groping. In sovereignty it is a most happy thing not to be compelled; but so it is the most miserable not to be counselled. And how can he be counselled that cannot see to read the best counsellors, which are books; for they neither flatter us nor hide from us? He may hear, you will say; but how shall he always be sure to hear truth? or be counselled the best things, not the sweetest? They say princes learn no art truly but the art of horsemanship. The reason is, the brave

beast is no flatterer. He will throw a prince as soon as his groom. Which is an argument that the good counsellors to princes are the best instruments of a good age. For though the prince himself be of most prompt inclination to all virtue, yet the best pilots have need of mariners, besides sails, anchor, and other tackle.

It must be admitted that the royalism of this laureate is sufficiently tempered and allayed with rational or republican good sense to excite in the reader's mind a certain curiosity of conjecture as to the effect which might or which must have been produced on his royal patrons by the publication of opinions so irreconcilable with the tragically comic form of idolatry embodied in the heroes and expressed in the rhapsodies of Beaumont and Fletcher. Amintor and Aëcius, Archas and Aubrey, are figures or types of unnatural heroism or preposterous devotion which are obviously and essentially wellnigh as far from Jonson's ideal of manhood and of duty as from Shakespeare's.

There is a quaint fierce touch of humour in the reflection that 'he which is sole heir to many rich men, having (beside his father's and uncle's) the estates of divers his kindred come to him by accession, must needs be richer than father or grandfather: so they which are left heirs *ex asse*' (sole

heirs) 'of all their ancestor's vices, and by their good husbandry improve the old, and daily purchase new, must needs be wealthier in vice, and have a greater revenue or stock of ill to spend on.' But this is only one in a score of instances which might be quoted to show that if a great English poet and humourist had left nothing behind him but this little book of 'maxims,' as the French call them—notes, observations, or reflections cast in a form more familiar to French than to English writers—he would still hold a place beside or above La Rochefoucauld, and beside if not above Chamfort. And yet, even among his countrymen, it may be feared that the sardonic wit and the cynical wisdom of the brilliant French patrician and the splendid French plebeian are familiar to many who have never cared to investigate the *Discoveries* of Ben Jonson.

Again we meet the strangely outspoken satirist and malcontent in the person of the court laureate who allowed himself to remark that 'the great thieves of a state are lightly' [usually or naturally] 'the officers of the crown: they hang the less still, play the pikes in the pond, eat whom they list. The net was never spread for the hawk or buzzard that hurt us, but the harmless birds; they are good

meat.' But the critic of state consoles himself with a reflection on the precarious tenure of their powers enjoyed by such tenants or delegates of tyranny, and cites against them a well-known witticism of that great practical humourist King Louis XI.

The partially autobiographic or personal note which follows this opens and closes at once nobly and simply.

> A good man will avoid the spot of any sin. The very aspersion is grievous; which makes him choose his way in his life, as he would in his journey. The ill man rides through all confidently; he is coated and booted for it. The oftener he offends, the more openly; and the fouler, the fitter in fashion. His modesty, like a riding-coat, the more it is worn, is the less cared for. It is good enough for the dirt still, and the ways he travels on.

No one will be surprised to find that Ben Jonson's chosen type or example of high-minded innocence, incessantly pursued by malice, delated and defamed, but always triumphant and confident, even when driven to the verge of a precipice, is none other than Ben Jonson. His accusers were 'great ones'; but they 'were driven, for want of crimes, to use invention, which was found slander; or too late (being entered so far) to seek starting-holes for their rashness, which were not given them.'

His profession also, as well as his person, was attacked: 'they objected making of verses to me when I could object to most of them their not being able to read them but as worthy of scorn'; and strove, after the changeless manner of their estimable kind, to back and bolster up their accusations and objections by falsified and garbled extracts, 'which was an excellent way of malice; as if any man's context might not seem dangerous and offensive, if that which was knit to what went before were defrauded of his beginning; or that things by themselves uttered might not seem subject to calumny, which read entire would appear most free.' So little difference is there, in the composition of the meanest and foolishest among literary parasites and backbiters, between the characteristic developments or the representative products of the seventeenth and the nineteenth century.

At last they would object to me my poverty: I confess she is my domestic; sober of diet, simple of habit, frugal, painful, a good counsellor to me, that keeps me from cruelty, pride, or other more delicate impertinences, which are the nurse-children of riches.

All 'great and monstrous wickednesses,' avers the Laureate—not perhaps without an implied reference to such hideous instances as the case of

Somerset and Overbury,—'are the issue of the wealthy giants and the mighty hunters: whereas no great work, or worthy of praise or memory, but came out of poor cradles. It was the ancient poverty that founded commonweals, built cities, invented arts, made wholesome laws, armed men against vices, rewarded them with their own virtues, and preserved the honour and state of nations, till they betrayed themselves to riches.'

It is hardly too much to say that there are few finer passages than that in Landor; in other words, that there can be few passages as fine in any third writer of English prose.

The fierce and severe attack on worldliness and love of money which follows this noble panegyric on the virtues of poverty should be read as part of the same essay rather than as a separate note or reflection. Indeed, throughout the latter part of the *Discoveries*, it is obvious that we have before us the fragments, disunited and disjointed, of single and continuous essays on various great subjects, rather than the finished and coherent works which their author would have offered to his readers had he lived long enough in health and strength of spirit and of body to carry out his original design. This sermon against greed of all kinds—avarice, luxury,

ambition of state and magnificence of expenditure —is full of lofty wisdom and of memorable eloquence.

What a wretchedness is this, to thrust all our riches outward, and be beggars within; to contemplate nothing but the little, vile, and sordid things of the world: not the great, noble, and precious? We serve our avarice; and not content with the good of the earth that is offered us, we search and dig for the evil that is hidden. God offered us those things, and placed them at hand and near us, that he knew were profitable for us; but the hurtful he laid deep and hid. Yet do we covet only the things whereby we may perish; and bring them forth, when God and nature hath buried them. We covet superfluous things, when it were more honour for us if we could contemn necessary.

A little further on, the Laureate who had lavished the wealth of his poetic invention and his scenic ingenuity on the festivities which welcomed the Danish king to the court of his brother-in-law refers in the following terms of sorrowful and sarcastic reminiscence to those splendid and sterile extravagances of meaningless magnificence.

Have I not seen the pomp of a whole kingdom, and what a foreign king could bring hither? all[1] to make

[1] The current text reads 'Also'! My emendation at all events makes sense of a fine passage.

himself gazed and wondered at, laid forth as it were to the show—and vanish all away in a day. And shall that which could not fill the expectation of few hours entertain and take up our whole lives? when even it appeared as superfluous to the possessors as to me that was a spectator. The bravery was shown, it was not possessed: while it boasted itself, it perished. It is vile, and a poor thing, to place our happiness on these desires. Say we wanted them all. Famine ends famine.

These reflections are uncourtly enough from the hand of a courtly poet; but they are tame and tender if compared with his animadversions on 'vice and deformity,' which 'we may behold—so much the fouler in having all the splendour of riches to gild them, or the false light of honour and power to help them. Yet this is that wherewith the world is taken, and runs mad to gaze on: clothes and titles, the birdlime of fools.'

No man ever made more generous response to the friendly or generous kindness of others than Ben Jonson: no man had ever less disposition or inclination towards the grudging mood of mind which regrets or the abject mood of mind which resents the acceptance of a benefit. For all that he received of help or support from his wealthier friends or patrons he returned the noblest and most liberal payment in manly and self-respectful

gratitude: he did not, like the rival poets of the restored Stuarts, condescend to undertake the deification or glorification of a male or female prostitute of parliament or of court: but it must be admitted that the outpourings of his heart in thanks and praises may seem somewhat excessive even to those who bear in mind that the tribute of his cordial homage was by no means confined to kings and princes, lords and ladies. But that 'he would not flatter Neptune for his trident or Jove for his power to thunder'—that he would not speak well, that he could hardly forbear from speaking evil, of any whom he found or whom he held to be undeserving—is as certain as that no loftier scorn than breathes through the words above transcribed was ever expressed by the most democratic or sarcastic of republicans for the mere attributes of rank and power. This fierce and deep contempt informs with even more vehement eloquence the note which follows.

What petty things they are we wonder at! like children, that esteem every trifle, and prefer a fairing before their fathers; what difference is betwixt us and them, but that we are dearer fools, coxcombs at a higher rate? . . . All that we call happiness is mere painting and gilt; and all for money: what a thin membrane of honour that is! and how hath all true reputation fallen, since money

began to have any! Yet the great herd, the multitude, that in all other things are divided, in this alone conspire and agree; to love money. They wish for it, they embrace it, they adore it: while yet it is possest with greater stir and torment than it was gotten.

The pure and lofty wisdom of the next note is worthy of Epictetus or Aurelius.

Some men, what losses soever they have, they make them greater: and if they have none, even all that is not gotten is a loss. Can there be creatures of more wretched condition than these, that continually labour under their own misery and others' envy?[1] A man should study other things: not to covet, not to fear, not to repent him: to make his base such as no tempest shall shake him: to be secure of all opinion, and pleasing to himself, even for that wherein he displeases others: for the worst opinion, gotten for doing well, should delight us. Wouldst not thou be just but for fame, thou oughtest to be it with infamy: he that would have his virtue published is not the servant of virtue, but glory.

In the following satirical observation all students will recognize the creator of Fastidious Brisk—and rather, perhaps, the spirit of Macilente than of Asper.

A dejected countenance, and mean clothes, beget

[1] That is, the envy they bear towards others: an equivocal, awkward, and affected Latinism. The writer would not—he never would—remember that a phrase or a construction which makes very good Latin may make very bad English.

often a contempt, but it is with the shallowest creatures ; courtiers commonly : look up even with them in a new suit, you get above them straight. Nothing is more short-lived than [? their] pride : it is but while their clothes last : stay but while these are worn out, you cannot wish the thing more wretched or dejected.

In the four notes which compose a brief essay on painting (or, as Jonson calls it, picture) the finest passage by far is this wise and noble word of tribute paid to another great art by a great artist in letters :—

Whosoever loves not picture is injurious to truth and all the wisdom of poetry. Picture is the invention of heaven, the most ancient, and most akin to nature. It is itself a silent work, and always of one and the same habit : yet it doth so enter and penetrate the inmost affection (being done by an excellent artificer) as sometimes it overcomes the power of speech and oratory.

The summary history of 'picture,' or the art of painting, in which Jonson has given us his views on the relation of that art to poetry, geometry, optics, and moral philosophy, bears no less witness to his wide reading and his painstaking attention than to his quaint and dogmatic self-confidence in laying down the law at second hand on subjects of which he seems to have known less than little. But when we pass from criticism of painters to the lower ground

of satirical observation—from the heights of a noble art to the depths or levels of ignoble nature, we meet once more the same fierce and earnest critic of life who should certainly be acknowledged as the greatest of all poets by any one—if any one there be—to whom 'criticism of life' seems acceptable or imaginable as a definition of the essence or the end of poetry.

The opening of the satirical essay on parasites which is here divided or split up into two sections by the blundering negligence and the unprincipled incompetence of its editors has the force and the point of a keen and heavy weapon, edged with wit and weighted with indignation. Juvenal has hardly left us a more vivid likeness of the creatures who 'grow suspected of the master, hated of the servants, while they inquire, and reprehend, and compound, and delate business of the house they have nothing to do with.' This note ends with the admirable remark, 'I know not truly which is worse, he that maligns all or that praises all.' An eminent poet and dramatist of our own age, M. Auguste Vacquerie, has said much the same thing in words even more terse, accurate, and forcible than Jonson's:—'Louer tout, c'est une autre façon de dénigrer tout.'

What follows as part of the same note is a letter to a nobleman who had asked Jonson's advice as to the education of his sons, 'and especially to the advancement of their studies.' The kindly and practical wisdom of his counsel is 'not of an age, but for all time': indeed, it is in some points as far ahead of our own age as of the writer's. Though nature 'be proner in some children to some disciplines, yet are they naturally prompt to taste all by degrees, and with change. For change is a kind of refreshing in studies, and infuseth knowledge by way of recreation.' The old Westminster boy, who had paid such loyal homage of gratitude to the 'most reverend head' of his old master, is as emphatic in his preference of public to private education as in his insistence that scholars 'should not be affrighted or deterred in their entry, but drawn on with exercise and emulation.' His illustrious namesake of the succeeding century was hardly more emphatic in his advocacy of the opposite principle. That which Samuel Johnson and Charles Kingsley considered as 'doubtless the best of all punishments' is denounced by Ben Jonson as energetically as by Quintilian: but I trust he would not have preferred to it the execrable modern substitute of torture by

transcription—the infernal and idiotic infliction of so many hundred lines to be written out by way of penance.

Would we did not spoil our own children, and overthrow their manners ourselves by too much indulgence! To breed them at home is to breed them in a shade; where in a school they have the light and heat of the sun. They are used and accustomed to things and men. When they come forth into the commonwealth, they find nothing new, or to seek. They have made their friendships and aids, some to last their age. They hear what is commanded to others as well as themselves. Much approved, much corrected; all which they bring to their own store and use, and learn as much as they hear. Eloquence would be but a poor thing if we did but converse with singulars—speak man and man together. Therefore I like no private breeding. I would send them where their industry should be daily increased by praise; and that kindled by emulation. It is a good thing to inflame the mind, and though ambition itself be a vice, it is often the cause of great virtue. Give me that wit whom praise excites, glory puts on, or disgrace grieves; he is to be nourished with ambition, pricked forward with honour, checked with reprehension, and never to be suspected of sloth. Though he be given to play, it is a sign of spirit and liveliness, so there be a mean had of their sports and relaxations.

If the nineteenth century has said anything on this subject as well worth hearing—as wise, as

humane, as reasonable, as full of sympathy and of judgment—as these reflections and animadversions of a scholar living in the first half or quarter of the seventeenth, I have never chanced to meet with it.

The forty-eight notes or entries which complete the sum of Ben Jonson's *Discoveries* should be considered as composing an essay on style, continuous in aim though desultory in treatment. The cruel, stupid, and insolent neglect of his editors has left it in so disjointed and dislocated a condition that we can only read it as we might read so many stray notes jotted down irregularly at odd moments on the first sheet or scrap of paper which might have fallen under the fatigued and fitful hand of the venerable poet. The very last entry is a repetition of a former remark and a former quotation, tumbled in by some blundering printer's devil with no reference whatever to the sentence preceding it.[1] As to the punctuation, let one example stand for many. 'Again, whether a man's genius is best able to reach thither, it should more and more contend, lift, and dilate itself.' To rectify this hopeless nonsense does not require the skill of a Bentley or a Porson. It is obvious that Jonson must have written 'whither a man's genius is best able to

[1] Compare lxxii., *Not.* 4, and clxxi.

reach, thither,' &c. But the moles and bats who have hitherto taken charge of this great writer's text could not see even so simple and glaring a fact as this.

It is natural that Jonson should insist with some excess of urgency on the necessity for care and labour in writing.

> No matter how slow the style be at first, so it be laboured and accurate: seek the best, and be not glad of the froward conceits or first words that offer themselves to us; but judge of what we invent, and order what we approve. Repeat often what we have formerly written; which beside that it helps the consequence, and makes the juncture better, it quickens the heat of imagination, that often cools in the time of setting down, and gives it new strength, as if it grew lustier by the going back. As we see in the contention of leaping, they jump farthest that fetch their race largest; or as in throwing a dart or javelin we force back our arms to make our loose the stronger. Yet, if we have a fair gale of wind, I forbid not the steering out of our sail, so the favour of the gale deceive us not. For all that we invent doth please us in the conception or birth, else we would never set it down.

This extract is no exceptional example of the purity, force, and weight of style by which this essay is distinguished even among the works of its author. It is impossible for any commentator to

convey more than a most imperfect impression of its rich and various merits.

Great as was Jonson's reliance on the results of training and study, he never forgot that 'arts and precept avail nothing, except nature be beneficial and aiding. And therefore these things are no more written to a dull disposition than rules of husbandry to a barren soil. No precepts will profit a fool; no more than beauty will the blind, or music the deaf. As we should take care that our style in writing be neither dry nor empty, we should look again it be not winding, or wanton with far-fetched descriptions: either is a vice. But that is worse which proceeds out of want than that which riots out of plenty. The remedy of fruitfulness is easy, but no labour will help the contrary.'

Of Spenser, whom he seems to have liked no better than did Landor—in other words, no better than might have been expected of him,—he speaks here, on one point at least, in terms quite opposite to those recorded in Drummond's too sparing and irregular but delightful and invaluable notes. To the Scottish poet he said that 'Spenser's stanzas pleased him not, nor his matter': whereas in this later essay, while still

insisting that 'Spenser, in affecting the ancients, writ no language,' he adds, 'yet I would have him read for his matter, but as Virgil read Ennius.' In his preference of Plautus to Terence, it may be observed that Ben Jonson anticipated the verdict of two such very different great men as Jonathan Swift and Victor Hugo.

> In the Greek poets, as also in Plautus, we shall see the economy and disposition of poems better observed than in Terence, and the latter [that is, in later comic dramatists], who thought the sole grace and virtue of their fable the sticking in of sentences, as ours do the forcing in of jests.

The Herculean energy and industry of Jonson might have been expected to make him as intolerant of indolence as he shows himself in the following fine passage:—

> We should not protect our sloth with the patronage of difficulty. It is a false quarrel [*querela*, as the marginal title of this note expresses it] against nature, that she helps understanding but in a few, when the most part of mankind are inclined by her thither, if they would take the pains; no less than birds to fly, horses to run, &c.; which if they lose, it is through their own sluggishness, and by that means become her prodigies, not her children.

The whole of the section which opens with these noble and fervent words should be most carefully studied by those who would appreciate the peculiar character of Jonson's intelligence and genius. It may be doubted, even by those who would admit that we learn best what we learn earliest, whether 'nature in children is more patient of labour in study, than in age; for the sense of the pain, the labour of the judgment, is absent; they do not measure what they have done. And it is the thought and consideration that affects us, more than the weariness itself.' Plato, we are reminded, went first to Italy and afterwards to Egypt in pursuit of Pythagorean and Osirian mysteries. 'He laboured, so must we.' From the examples of musicians and preachers, whose work requires the service of many faculties at once, this lesson may be drawn:—'if we can express this variety together, why should not divers studies, at divers hours, delight, when the variety is able alone to refresh and repair us? As, when a man is weary of writing, to read; and then again of reading, to write. Wherein, howsoever we do many things, yet are we (in a sort) still fresh to what we begin; we are recreated with change, as the stomach is with meats. . . . It is easier to do

many things, and continue, than to do one thing long.'

'A fool may talk,' as Jonson observes a little further on, 'but a wise man speaks': and to such a man it will scarcely be questioned that we have been listening. But though 'it were a sluggish and base thing to despair' when the attainment of knowledge is possible, yet, 'if a man should prosecute as much as could be said of everything, his work would find no end.'

The next four notes deal more directly with special and practical details and principles of style. If some of the points insisted on seem either obsolete or obvious, there are others which cannot be too often asserted or too strenuously maintained. Silence may be golden on certain occasions; but it is none the less certain that 'speech is the only benefit man hath to express his excellency of mind above other creatures. Words are the people's, yet there is a choice of them to be made'; and the rules laid down for the limitation and regulation of this choice are as sound in principle as brilliant in expression. At every step we find something which might well be quoted in evidence of this.

A good man always profits by his endeavour, by his

help, yea, when he is absent, nay, when he is dead, by his example and memory. So good authors in their style: a strict and succinct style is that where you can take away nothing without loss, and that loss to be manifest.

The grace of metaphor in the following sentence is not more notable than the soundness of its counsel.

Some words are to be culled out for ornament and colour, as we gather flowers to strew houses, or make garlands; but they are better when they grow in our style; as in a meadow, where though the mere grass and greenness delight, yet the variety of flowers doth heighten and beautify.

No modern student of letters will read this without seeing in it an anticipatory tribute to the incomparable style of Mr. Ruskin.

All the definitions of different styles are good, but this is excellent:—

The congruent and harmonious fitting of parts in a sentence hath almost the fastening and force of knitting and connection; as in stones well squared, which will rise strong a great way without mortar.

The reader of the following extract will be reminded at its close of an ever-memorable deliverance recorded by Boswell.

Periods are beautiful, when they are not too long; for

so they have their strength too, as in a pike or javelin. As we must take the care that our words and sense be clear, so, if the obscurity happen through the hearer's or reader's want of understanding, I am not to answer for them, no more than for their not listening or marking; I must neither find them ears nor mind.

All must remember how the second great dictator of literary London who bore the name of Johnson expressed the same very rational objection:—'I have found you a reason, sir; I am not bound to find you an understanding.'

The following precept is of perennial value—and of perennial application.

We should therefore speak what we can the nearest way, so as we keep our gait, not leap; for too short may as well be not let into the memory, as too long not kept in. Whatsoever loseth the grace and clearness, converts into a riddle: the obscurity is marked, but not the value. That perisheth, and is passed by, like the pearl in the fable. Our style should be like a skein of silk, to be carried and found by the right thread, not ravelled and perplexed: then all is a knot, a heap.

Nor is this less weighty or less true:—

Language most shows a man. Speak, that I may see thee. It springs out of the most retired and inmost parts of us, and is the image of the parent of it, the mind. No glass renders a man's form or likeness so true as his speech.

Nay, it is likened to a man: and as we consider feature and composition in a man, so words in language; in the greatness, aptness, sound, structure, and harmony of it.

The seven succeeding notes deal in more detail with various kinds of oratory; 'high and great,' 'grave, sinewy, and strong,' or 'humble and low,' 'plain and pleasing,' or 'vicious' and bombastic, 'fleshy, fat, and corpulent—full of suet and tallow,' or 'bony and sinewy.' These notes are as full of happy and humorous illustration as of sound and sensible criticism; but it is a matter of more interest to consider the observations of such a man as Jonson on such men as Bacon and Aristotle. His reflections on the mediæval worship of a name are not unworthy of modern consideration.

Nothing is more ridiculous than to make an author a dictator, as the schools have done Aristotle. The damage is infinite knowledge receives by it: for to many things a man should owe but a temporary relief and suspension of his own judgment, not an absolute resignation of himself, or a perpetual captivity. Let Aristotle and others have their dues; but if we can make farther discoveries of truth and fitness than they, why are we envied? Let us beware, while we strive to add, we do not diminish or deface; we may improve, but not augment. By discrediting falsehood, truth grows in request. We must not go about, like men anguished or perplexed, for vicious

affectation of praise; but calmly study the separation of opinions, find the errors have intervened, awake antiquity, call former times into question; but make no parties with the present, nor follow any fierce undertakers; mingle no matter of doubtful credit with the simplicity of truth, but gently stir the mould about the root of the question.

The remarks 'on epistolary style' are rich in humour and good sense, as well as curiously illustrative of the singular fashion of the time. 'Sometimes men make baseness of kindness,' observes the writer; and proceeds to illustrate the fact, in a manner which may remind us of Thackeray's, by examples of absurd and verbose adulation, expressed in phrases 'that go a-begging for some meaning, and labour to be delivered of the great burden of nothing.'

A word seems to have dropped out of the following admirable sentence; but the beetle-headed boobies to whose carelessness the charge of Jonson's posthumous writings was committed by the malignity of accident were incapable of noticing the nonsense they had made of it.

The next property of epistolary style is perspicuity, and is oftentimes [lost] by affectation of some wit ill angled for, or ostentation of some hidden terms of art. Few words they darken speech, and so do too many; as

well too much light hurteth the eyes as too little ; and a long bill of chancery confounds the understanding as much as the shortest note ; therefore let not your letters be penned like English statutes, and this is obtained.

Passing from the subjects of oratory and letter-writing to the subject of poetry, the Laureate at once falls foul of his personal assailants. 'The age is grown so tender of her fame, as she calls all writings aspersions. That is the state word, the phrase of court—Placentia College, which some call Parasites' Place, the Inn of Ignorance.' That is a tolerably harsh phrase for a wearer of courtly laurels to allow himself; but it is gentle and temperate compared with this effusion of divine wrath on the heads of victims now indiscernible and secure from fame or shame.

It sufficeth I know what kind of persons I displease ; men bred in the declining and decay of virtue, betrothed to their own vices ; that have abandoned or prostituted their good names ; hungry and ambitious of infamy, invested in all deformity, enthralled to ignorance and malice, of a hidden and concealed malignity, and that hold a concomitancy with all evil.

The general and historical notes on poetry which follow are of less interest than they assuredly must have been if Jonson had given us

less of Aristotle, Cicero, and Horace, and more of himself. It is therefore less important to know what he thought of Euripides than to know what he thought of Aristotle.

> But whatsoever nature at any time dictated to the most happy, or long exercise to the most laborious, that the wisdom and learning of Aristotle hath brought into an art; because he understood the causes of things: and what other men did by chance or custom, he doth by reason; and not only found out the way not to err, but the short way we should take not to err.

'To judge of poets,' says a later note, 'is only the faculty of poets; and not of all poets, but the best.' It is unlucky that in the note preceding it Ben Jonson should have committed himself to the assertion that Euripides, of all men, 'is sometimes peccant, as he is most times perfect.' The perfection of such shapeless and soulless abortions as the *Phœnissae* and the *Hercules Furens* is about as demonstrable as the lack of art which Ben Jonson regretted and condemned in the author of *Hamlet* and *Othello*.

It is comically pathetic to find that the failure of Jonson's later comedies had led him to observe, with the judicious Aristotle, that 'the moving of laughter is a fault in comedy, a kind of turpitude

that depraves some part of a man's nature without a disease': and likewise that 'this induced Plato to esteem of Homer as a sacrilegious person, because he presented the gods sometimes laughing.' But this deplorable and degrading instinct of perverse humanity becomes irrepressible and irresistible in the reader who discovers in the author of *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Silent Woman* so delicate and sensitive a dislike of plebeian horseplay and farcical scurrility that he cannot at any price abide the insolence and indecency of so vulgar a writer as Aristophanes.

The concluding essay on 'the magnitude and compass of any fable, epic or dramatic,' is of less interest, except to special students, than the animadversions of the writer on more particular subjects of criticism. Constant good sense, occasional felicity of expression, conscientious and logical intensity of application or devotion to every point of the subject handled or attempted, all readers will find, as all readers will expect: and it should be superfluous to repeat that they will find a text so corrupt and so confused as no editor of any but an English classic would venture to publish.

And now it must be evident that if Ben

Jonson was the author of Bacon's Essays—as that eminent Irish-American scholar, Dr. Athanasius Dogberry (of New Gotham, U.S.A.), maintains with a fervour not unworthy of Rabbi Zeal-of-the-Land Busy—his genius and his intelligence were by no means at their best when he produced that famous volume, and gave or sold it to his friend the Lord Chancellor. The full and fertile harvest of eloquence and thought, the condensed and compressed wealth of reflection and observation, overflowing on all sides from the narrow garner or treasury of the wonderful little book on which I have not hoped to write anything more than a most imperfect and inadequate commentary, may still be left unreaped and untreasured by the common cry of nominal students or lovers of English literature. But none who have studied it can fail to recognize that its author was in every way worthy to have been the friend of Bacon and of Shakespeare.

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